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WE KNOW that wars are the ugliest sores on the battered body of the civilized world, and it is only through the possibility of war that armies are maintained in free countries such as this. Today, however, few men are so rash and few are so bold that they would counsel us to "Get rid of the Army!" They know too well the need for a formidable and well-prepared unit of national defense. The need of this is written in the swift and exciting language of the daily headlines; in the conversation of the day; in the tense and excited whisperings that come from across the seas.

We seldom think of the thousand and one divisions of the Army. We dwell but briefly on the cooks and carpenters and the soldiers under tin hats who skirmish occasionally with an overwrought citizenry. To us, it is more fun to think about the Aviation Corps of the Army, one of the greatest air circuses of the day.

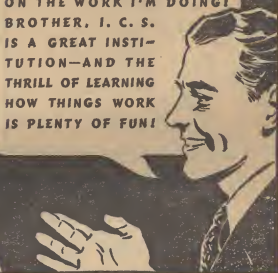
There is a life for you jolly gentlemen! There is a business for a man who wants to fly. Look to the skies and you will see the Army there, as swift as any, as brave as any, as richly productive in the realm of flying science. For young men who wish to make a career of flying there is no greater opportunity anywhere than that afforded by the United States Army.

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SURE—BUT I'VE GOT
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Coffins for Aces

by WILLIAM HARTLEY



Lead fills the sky, and glory rides on wings of flame, but there is no substitute for courage! A man is fashioned by the years and the things within his soul—but an ounce of lead can make a corpse!

THE Spad responded instantly as Jerry Raynor shoved the stick into the corner and booted left rudder. He slid down the sky like a hawk, his eyes over his shoulder and fastened on the Fokker behind him. He couldn't shake the guy. His first time over the lines, and this had to happen!

It wasn't fear or regret that he entertained in his mind. It was merely a sense of disappointment that he wasn't a better pilot than he seemed to be at the moment. He'd waited a long while for this chance,

and now that it was here he was making a mess of the whole damn thing.

But the Fokker followed him relentlessly, and there wasn't much time to think of anything but getting the hell out of the way. Jerry didn't realize that he'd been doing just that for almost five minutes. He didn't know that he was pitted against a man who had been flying when Jerry was still in school, his mind full of football and calculus. He didn't think of the fight as an uneven conflict between an eagle, bitter and experienced, and a young

hawk who had just found his wings. He was aware only of a slight shame that the guy was putting it all over him like a tent. He wasn't aware of the fact that he was flying superbly; that he was a battle-pilot to the manner born; that if he had made but one mistake during the last five minutes, his body would be a riddled piece of meat in a burning ship.

But the man in the Fokker knew these things. The cruel eyes were slitted, the thin lips curled in savage annoyance. This fool in the Spad was giving him more trouble than he'd bargained for. He'd had no idea that the kill would take this long. He knew the man was a rookie, for he knew every ship in the 19th Pursuit Squadron as he knew his own *staffel*. Why didn't the swine fall?

But that thought didn't occur to Jerry Raynor, in the Spad. He suddenly realized that he'd had the opportunity to fire but one round from his guns. He thought, "Hell, I can't bring this guy down if I don't shoot at him! No wonder he's got me chasing around the sky like a lost kite! This gent needs a little competition."

And he started to supply it. He had instinctively gone on the defensive, for he knew his opponent, or the *staffel* to which he belonged, by reputation. It was Wilster's outfit, one of the toughest on the Front. When 'C' Flight, of the 19th, had run into this crowd, it had seemed only natural to Jerry that the important things was to keep his hide intact. And his adversary, after gaining the offensive, had never surrendered it. Jerry changed all that.

The Fokker was above and behind him, at the moment, and he kicked off to the side, then pulled the stick into his belly. The big Hissro roared under the strain, but it pulled him right up on top. He kicked over swiftly and leveled off, and the Fokker was just turning to meet him. He hammered down on the trips and watched his tracer go to meet the black-

crossed ship that was roaring his way.

The German crate wobbled a bit as the tracer met it, and Jerry knew that he had scored a hit, but whether it was on the pilot he did not know. But in a moment he had that information, too. The ships passed each other closely, and Jerry could see the other man clearly.

One hand, the left, was at his jaw, and Jerry could see the steady flow of the blood. It seemed to be a minor wound, though, for the Hun pilot was at him again before he had time to turn.

He lashed back to meet the attack, and then it happened. The Fokker was above him, at a bad angle for both ships, when the Mercedes began to kick. He could see the quick jets of black smoke pour from the exhaust, and he sensed the interrupted rhythm of the motor. He could see the pilot pounding at the guns with one hand, and he sheered off out of the way. His thumb had been on the trips for the last burst, but he pulled it away, frowning. If the guy was in trouble, let him go down—there was no reason why he should be *shot* down. But then he changed his mind—when it was too late.

The Fokker, which had been on the point of a stall, suddenly leaped alive. The black smoke no longer plumed from the stacks, and before he could move, Jerry saw the nasty red winking of the Spandaus and watches the tracer lining for his ship. There was nothing he could do about it, and he swore in anger as a slug bit into his shoulder and lead thudded into the Hissro. The prop snapped off like a toothpick, and he cut the switch with his good hand and started for the carpet.

But it wasn't to be that simple. The man in back of him had other intentions. He heard the Spandaus chatter as he started to fall and he heard the lead *flick-flick* into the fuselage behind him. His throat was filled with anger, but he was too busy to look behind him. He was at

four thousand feet, and he'd make a beautiful target all the way down.

How he did it was never able to remember afterward. The lead was a deadly hail at his back, and he dodged wildly. He stood the Spad on its nose, finally, and let it fall. He started to pull it out at two hundred feet, and it wasn't quite enough. He hit fast, sliding along on the crumpled undercarriage, which had collapsed at the first impact. Then he saw the low stump ahead of him, and he felt the smash dully. And that was all he felt.

HE CAME to three hours later, and he felt like hell. He was bumping along a rutted road in the back of a big truck. He saw that his shoulder had been banded crudely and his good hand brushed some dried blood from his forehead. He could remember the moment of landing, and the impact of his head against the instrument panel. He grinned wryly, but then the smile curdled on his lips.

That louse who had shot him down! There was a nice guy for you! He'd had the tramp for cold turkey, then let go when the gent had seemed all washed up. It had been a smart trick, but one that only a rat would pull. He wondered dully if he'd ever meet up with the guy again. If he did, he'd know what to do.

But he didn't have much time for thinking. The truck slowed to a halt, and an armed guard near him whom he hadn't noticed before, shoved the barrel of his rifle in Jerry's back. It was clear that he was to get out.

"Okay, stupid," he said. "I'm a big boy. I can walk all by myself. I don't need that thing in my spine."

He saw that they were at the entrance of a huge enclosure of some kind, and he instantly identified it as an advance prison camp. The high barbed wire fence, and in back of that another, spoke for themselves. He shrugged.

"One day at the Front, and then it's

all over but the waiting. I spend a couple of months learning how to fly, then I fall for a sucker stunt and I'm all through. A little expensive for Uncle Sam."

He was put through the office, at the gate of the camp, but he kept his mouth shut and didn't bother to answer any of the questions that were put to him in bad English. The questioning officer was insistent. He wanted to know Jerry's squadron, where it was located, how many casualties they had suffered lately. Finally Jerry said,

"Why don't you stop it, pal? I don't feel a bit like talking. Lead me to a bunk. I'm tired."

The questioning went on, but the officer finally scowled, shrugged his shoulders, and spoke to one of the guards standing in the room. The soldier took Jerry roughly by the arm and led him away, inside the stockade.

It was just about as Jerry had imagined it would be. The camp was relatively large, and there were many prisoners. The Germans had put on a big push, lately, and these were part of the spoils. He wondered where they slept, and then he saw the row of long, low buildings in the center of the camp. Prisoners were crowded around the huts, and the guard shoved him roughly in that direction.

He had noticed that the camp was crowded, and most of the prisoners trudged slowly and sluggishly around the long barracks. The sky had clouded, and there was a dismal rain falling. There were armed guards moving about among the prisoners.

He approached a group and addressed one of the men, a small, slight chap in the uniform of an English infantry regiment. He said,

"Hello," and as the man looked at him, he asked, "Where the hell are we?"

His reply came not from the Englishman, but from a guard behind him, whom he had not seen. It was a clubbing blow

at the base of the neck from the man's fist, and Jerry hit the ground hard. He rose as quickly as he could, his brain filled with a red, roaring rage, and turned. The guard held the stock of a rifle pointed at him, and Jerry knew that any show of resistance would mean a loss of teeth, if nothing more serious. He walked slowly away.

The little Englishman contrived to follow him, and suddenly he heard a low whisper. He looked at the infantryman, but he couldn't detect any movement of the man's lips. The fellow was speaking, though, out of some hidden corner of his mouth.

"You can't talk in this dump, Yank. They'll knock your bloomin' teeth down your throat."

"I managed to find that out," Jerry told him cautiously. "Where are we?"

The lips didn't move, but the voice replied again.

"We're about twenty miles in back of the lines. They'll be sending some of us back to a permanent camp, one of these days. They make shipments about once a month, and we're almost due."

A burly guard looked at them suspiciously, from twenty feet away, and the little Englishman sauntered off.

Jerry looked about him, and what he saw was squalor. The bare ground had been worn to a muddy paste by the tread of many feet, and the buildings looked even less inviting than that part of the camp he had already seen. He walked over to one of them and looked in through a dirty window.

It wasn't a building, merely a shelter. There was no flooring of any kind, but the many small heaps of straw told him that there was where the prisoners slept. Water ran through a trough at one end of the shed, and he was suddenly reminded of the fact that he was desperately thirsty. He walked to the entrance of the building and was on his way in when guard jerked

at his sleeve and threw him to one side. He looked at the man wonderingly, then the voice was at his elbow again.

"Follow me, Yank."

It was the Englishman, and Jerry followed at a discreet distance as the man walked away from the long shed. When they were clear of the guards, the little chap asked,

"And what are you after now, Yank?"

"Water," Jerry told him. "I'm thirsty as hell."

The Englishman shook his head.

"You'll get no water for two hours, yet, when they call us for mess." He spat into the ground, and the gesture was eloquent. "Mess! It's not the name for it, lad, but it's the nicest thing we can call it." He looked around to see that they were not observed, then he continued.

"They're cruel hard on a man, here. You eat and drink at a certain hour, and at no other time. Here's where you'll learn your P's and Q's, my lad. You've got to watch every move you make, and even at that you can't make many. You stick by me, Yank, and you'll save yourself a lot of trouble. I've been here long enough to learn all the dodges, so stay with me, lad."

Mess was a concoction of some foul soup and rotten bread, and Jerry wasn't hungry enough to eat it. There was water, though, and he drank his fill. The Englishman, who was in the next seat, advised,

"Eat it, Yank. It's all you'll get for a long time. It'll do you some good."

Jerry tried, on this sound advice, but it was no go. His stomach just wasn't desperate enough to take it.

The Englishman, whose name he found to be Harris, had a heap of straw for him to sleep on, next to his own untidy little pile. Jerry was grateful. His shoulder was aching, now, and he knew that he needed, above all things, rest. He slept as if he'd been on a feather bed.

THE morning was bright and clear, and there was a certain restlessness in the camp that Jerry wasn't able to identify. Harris told him, out of the corner of his mouth.

"There's to be a shipment today. Some of us are slated to go back to a permanent camp. The news gets around."

"Who'll go?" Jerry asked him.

Harris shrugged. "It's usually the blokes who've been here the longest, but you can never tell. Sometimes they ship the new ones."

"When will we know?"

"About three o'clock in the afternoon. That's when they call the roll, most of the time."

But Jerry didn't have to wait that long for news. About eleven o'clock, he saw a car drive up to the gate of the camp, and several men got out. They walked into the office, and a few minutes later they were in the camp proper. It took only a glance to learn that it was a party of German officers, and Harris, who was at Jerry's side, said in a puzzled tone,

"I wonder what the hell this is?"

They soon found out.

Two men, officers by their insignia, were conducted by a camp guard towards the group in which Jerry and Harris were standing. Jerry noticed that one of the men, tall and gaunt, wore a heavy bandage on the lower part of his face. All the features above his chin were visible, and Jerry didn't like them. The eyes were small and cruel, the lips thin and tight, the nose lean and beaked. The guard came directly to Jerry. He took him by the arm and said, "This is the one, *Herr Kapitan*."

He addressed the man with the bandaged jaw, and Jerry found himself being minutely inspected.

The man looked him over from head to foot, then said,

"I am Wilster."

The word meant a lot to Jerry. He'd

been hearing it ever since he'd come to France. He'd heard a lot about the man at the 19th, and he had no trouble recalling that only yesterday, in a fight with this man's *staffel*, he'd been shot down. But he was sore; sore at the trick that had been played on him in the air; angry about the rotten food he hadn't been able to eat; troubled by the wounded shoulder. So he said:

"So you're Wilster. I knew right away that you weren't Santa Claus. He's got whiskers. What am I supposed to do—stand on my head?"

It apparently took a moment for it to sink in, but when it did, the German's actions were swift. He carried a riding crop in his hand, and now it flashed in the air and whipped across Jerry's cheek. Jerry didn't move, but there was a voice that spoke from his side. It was Harris.

"Here! Here! That's no way to treat an injured man!"

Jerry could see that the little chap was moved beyond his ordinary caution, and he tried to stop him. But the words were already out, and the gun butt of a nearby guard thudded home on the little man's head. Jerry winced as Harris fell, but there was nothing he could do. He faced Wilster.

"I see you have made friends already," the man said, "and you have not been wise in the choice of your companions." He lighted a cigarette, looked at Jerry and continued:

"I just stopped by to see the fool I downed yesterday." He touched the bandaged jaw. "The fool who scarred me before I blew him out of the air."

There was a question in Jerry's eyes, and Wilster answered it.

"Yes, the doctors tell me that I will carry this wound for the rest of my life, here on my face for all to see." His face clouded, and he said, "That is something I do not like." The riding crop flashed again, and once more Jerry felt the sting

of the leather biting into his angry flesh.

"I come here," the German said, "and find the insolent dog I expected to find, and at his side another cur that he's picked up somewhere." He looked down at the body of the unconscious Harris. "An English mongrel."

His leg swung fully, and the heavy boot caught the unconscious Harris just at the base of the skull. There was a sudden sharp breaking sound, and the little Englishman's body jerked convulsively, then was still. Jerry stared at him, then his body moved almost instinctively.

His left hand flashed out, and he grasped Wilster by the coat. His right crashed across, and the bandage was soft under his hand, then he felt the bone against his knuckles. The German slumped, but Jerry held him erect and threw the right hand again and again, until he felt the sudden shock against his head and the lights went out.

HE AWOKE and felt the moisture on his face. His shoulder was throbbing, and his head felt several sizes larger than he remembered it. He raised himself on an elbow and looked about him.

It was raining, but the light told him that it was still early in the day and he guessed that he hadn't been out long. He was still in the prison yard, and the other men were milling about in their customary fashion, and every now and then one of them would look in his direction. He suddenly remembered what had happened, and looked about for Harris.

The little Englishman had been taken away, and Wilster, too, apparently had left. He shook his head, and his soul was full of hatred. He would never forget that scene; Harris protesting, the driven rifle butt, then the brutal, killing kick. It might take a long time, but he'd do something about that.

His thoughts were interrupted, though, by a guard. The soldier came along the side of the barracks, saw Jerry sitting in

the rain, came over and prodded him with his foot. He motioned with his head for Jerry to get up and follow him. Jerry knew there was no use being stupid about it.

He got slowly to his feet, and the guard shoved him in the direction of the gate. He saw that there was a crowd there, prisoners pressed against the wire near the entrance. Guards were shoving them into line, and Jerry silently took his place in the crude ranks.

There was a file of trucks outside the camp, and Jerry saw that the prisoners were being herded into these. He was near the end of the line, and it took quite a while to get to him. He caught several snatches of a guarded conversation between the prisoners, and his suspicions were confirmed. They were being taken to a permanent camp, far behind the lines.

There were two guards in the rear of each truck, and he had no chance to talk to the men near him. They seemed singularly unenthusiastic about his company, and he couldn't blame them. Harris hadn't done so well.

They rode for perhaps an hour, and Jerry saw that they were entering a rather large town. He heard the whistle of train engines, and he knew that he was in for a ride. There were ten of the trucks, and they drew up at the station.

Jerry thought that the ride would be taken in freight cars, and he was surprised when they took him down off the truck and shoved him, with the others, into a long train made up of passenger coaches. It was crowded, but there was a seat for each of them.

They didn't stay in the station long. The train began to roll, and Jerry got a chance to look about him.

There were two prisoners to a seat, and they were chained together by two feet of steel. There were two guards at each end of the train, and two more patrolling up and down the aisle. They

watched the prisoners like hawks, and as far as Jerry could see, escape was out of the question.

THEY had been riding for two hours when night fell, and Jerry's mind had been constantly at work. As far as he could see, there was only one way out of this, and he was determined to try it. He had things to do beside rot in a prison camp for the next few years.

He'd noticed that when any of the prisoners evinced a desire to go to the lavatory, which was located at one end of the car, a guard would unfasten the chain which linked the prisoner to his seatmate, then walk him down the aisle and go into the lavatory with him. When they returned, the chain would be snapped on the prisoner again.

The man next to Jerry was asleep, and the whole train was quiet. He thought it was about time to go to work.

He motioned to one of the guards pacing the aisle, and pointed towards the end of the car. The man knew what he meant, and came up leisurely and unlocked the chain from Jerry's wrist. He motioned Jerry to go ahead of him down the length of the car.

The lavatory was small, and once inside, with the door closed, Jerry knew that he'd have to work fast. As the guard closed the door, Jerry let him have it. He brought his knee up into the man's groin, and as the fellow slumped, he drove the

right to the man's chin. The guard collapsed, moaning, and Jerry turned to the window of the lavatory. It was small, but he knew it would have to do. He raised one foot and smashed the glass. He knew the crash was audible in the car, and he mouthed a silent prayer and dove through the small opening.

Luck was with him. The train was moving slower than usual, for they were just starting across a long trestle that bridged a marsh. Jerry hit hard and rolling, but the ground beneath him was soft and muddy. He felt the long marsh grass against his face as he rolled, and it only took him a moment to get his breath and gain his feet. He set off at a run, away from the tracks.

The train stopped, and he knew they were coming after him. He ran as fast as his legs would carry him, but behind him he heard the sound of pursuit. The guards had lanterns and flashlights, and it was going to be a close thing.

He moved quickly, but silently, and five minutes after he had hit the ground, he knew he had a good chance of getting away with it. The guards were strung out behind him, now, and there wasn't one within two hundred yards. They were searching every clump of grass they came to, and although he was forced to move slowly to avoid making any noise, he gained on them. After an hour's slogging through the mud, he knew he was safe for the time being.



WHAT HAPPENED TO CROSS-PATCH?

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In a short while he heard the whistle of the train, far behind him, and he knew they were giving up the search. He was exhausted. He lay down in a thick clump of weed, and he could feel himself sinking off to sleep immediately. He had a long way to go, but for the moment he had nothing to fear.

HE MADE it, finally, back to his own lines. It took him eight days, and afterward he couldn't remember much of the trip. He traveled by night only, and it had been tough going. His shoulder had started to fester on him, and that first night in the marsh had left him with a fever. He was a muddy, bloodstained, delirious wreck when some French infantrymen dragged him through their wire, just before one shell-wracked dawn.

He spent three weeks in a hospital, then went back to the 19th. They were glad to see him. He was glad to be back.

He was different from the boy who had come up, a month and a half before. His body was harder, and his face was deeply lined. There were things in his eyes that were never meant to be in the eyes of youth, and his mouth was grim and unsmiling.

He flew as often as he could, on regular patrols and on solo jaunts along the lines, until he became a living, breathing part of the Spad under him. His guns were almost like his eyes, as six German pilots came to find out. The lead went where he wanted it to go, and he was out for blood.

He had company on most of his jaunts, one of the veteran pilots in 'C' Flight, a man who had seen him go down. Jake Williams was big and tough, and he took one look at Jerry when he returned and promptly adopted him. He taught him all the tricks he had learned in a year at the game of saving his hide and blowing holes in the other gent's, and Jerry was an apt and willing pupil. They flew together and they drank together.

Williams continued his tutoring, even on the ground, and one night in the mess bar, two weeks after Jerry had started flying again, he was talking.

"Kid, you learned your lesson the hard way. Never give a sucker an even break. You had that guy Wilster dead to rights: you should have let him have the business. You can never tell when one of these gents is going to play possum with you, and then it's too late to be sorry. If they're hit, hit them again. If they're falling down, knock them down. It's the only ticket."

"It's a tough ticket," Jerry said. "Murder is a lousy business."

Williams snorted. "War isn't pretty, kid, and it doesn't seem any nicer when you're on the wrong end of a bunch of lead. You should have it all down pat by now."

Jerry frowned. "They can't all be like that louse. I don't know what I'd do, if the same situation arose. There's a guy in front of you with a conked motor or a set of busted guns. What are you going to do? Hell, he isn't a clay pigeon, Jake!"

"You may not think so, kid, but the guy might have ideas about you. Hell, kid, any gent who's flying a crate expects to get it sooner or later. You last just so long, and then it's all over. Suppose a gent throws a bunch of slugs through your motor or messes up your guns. You know damn well that if it had been a foot or two further back, the lead would be in your noggin. So if he finishes you off on your way down, what the hell difference does it make? You just missed it a few minutes before, and now you're getting it."

"You're not too logical, Jake."

"If I'm not logical, I'm damn practical. Don't forget what I'm tellin' you, kid. We're lookin' for medals, but we all know that what we'll eventually get will be coffins."

Jerry had plenty of time to think about it. On the morning patrol the next day, 'C' Flight ran right into trouble. There were five of them in the flight, and fifteen miles from home they barged into six Pfalz, escorting two camera ships. They didn't waste any time getting to work.

Jerry got one of the camera ships with his initial burst. First the observer folded up, then his line of tracer crept forward to the pit and the pilot slumped over the stick, his hands clutching at his ripped belly.

Two of the Pfalz were going down, and a Spad, which Jerry quickly identified as that of Tommy Dowd, was spinning toward the carpet wrapped in flames. It was four against four, now, with the remaining camera job running like hell for its own side of the lines.

There was a Pfalz on Jerry's tail when he finished with the first camera crate, and he turned and went high up, then came down on it again. It took him almost two minutes, but he finally got the guy with a beautiful deflection shot. He looked about him.

The fighting was scattered about the sky, now, and Jerry saw that one of the Spads was close to the fleeing camera ship. He knew the German plane wouldn't get away so he turned his attention to events closer at hand.

There were only two ships near him, a Pfalz and a Spad, and he saw from the insignia on the side of the pit that the Spad was Williams'. The Fokker was in a zoom, and Jake was chasing him up the sky, both guns hosing a stream of lead. Jerry watched the tracer, saw it converge on the Pfalz, and knew that Jake's work was over for the day. The German ship came out of the zoom, leveled off for a moment, then started to glide for the carpet. The pilot had both hands raised in a gesture of helplessness, and Jerry could see that the prop was motionless. A motor hit.

He watched Jake come down behind the Pfalz, and he was shocked, somehow, in spite of what Jake had said the night before, to see that the Vickers were still coughing their ugly song. The nose of the Spad centered on the Pfalz for one moment, then turned away, but that had been enough. There was a sudden puff of smoke from the German plane, then it became a raging ball of fire and plunged earthward.

BACK at the drome, Jerry set his ship down and taxied up to the line. He sat in the pit thoughtfully for a moment, then watched Jake come in. The Spad landed jerkily and bumped a couple of times. Jake usually set down as if he were landing on a rubber cushion.

He came over to Jerry, who had climbed from the pit, and said,

"Kid, I need a couple of drinks. I need them bad."

They went to the bar, and Jake took three fast ones before he spoke again. Then he looked at Jerry and asked,

"You saw it?"

Jerry nodded. He had decided to say nothing, to let Jake do the talking.

Jake talked, and what he said made Jerry feel good.

"Kid, it was all a mistake. Oh, I know what I said last night, but you can throw that out the window. I never meant to pot that guy! Honest, kid, it was all a mistake. After I got his motor, I followed him around, not sure that I'd finished the job. Then I saw that he was in trouble and waving his hands. The nose of the Spad was pointing right at him, and the guns were going. Kid, I couldn't stop them! There's more ways than one of jamming a gun. He couldn't get his going; I couldn't stop mine. It was just like holding a hose and not being able to turn the water off. They just kept going until the belts ran out."

Jerry grinned at him.

"That sounds good to me, Jake. I was sorry to see you do that. No matter what you say, it doesn't sound like a good idea. When I saw you giving it to him—well, I didn't feel good about it, that's all. Now I feel fine."

Jake grinned and said, "Kid, how about another drink?"

They went out in the afternoon, and the sky was blue and blown clear by a fresh wind. There were only four of them, now, for they had no one to fill Dowd's place. There was a push on in the sector, and their presence in the air was needed.

The first half hour was uneventful. Williams was at point, with Fletcher and Edmonds beside him. Jerry flew up in back of them, guarding the tail.

It was when they were over Voissons that Jerry saw the German flight, about two miles away and two thousand feet below them. He blurped his motor twice, and when Williams turned, Jerry pointed at the Fokkers. Williams waved back, and Jerry knew that he had seen them too.

They looked the spot over carefully, and they saw that there was a German infantry push going on, down below. The Hun troops were advancing, and every now and then the Fokkers would go down to strafe. That had to be stopped.

There were six of the German planes, and they were aware of the Spad's approach. They abandoned their attack on the ground troops and circled up for altitude as the Spads dove on them.

Williams hit first, and his long volley got results. The Fokkers were in close formation, and although his burst missed the leader of the German patrol, the tracer arrowed by and slammed into the motor of the crate which was second in line. It went up on its nose, then dropped off on one wing, like a shot bird. Then the fight was on in earnest.

The ships scattered, and every man had his own problem. Jerry had two of them.

He was the last man into the scrap, and the two unengaged Fokkers lost no time in giving him their full attention.

He roared right in at them, knowing they would expect anything but that, and he got one of them without any trouble. The pilot was surprised, and before he could turn out of the way of the rushing Spad, he was dead. The other presented a problem.

He was higher than Jerry, and as the Spad roared by underneath, the pilot whipped the Fokker over and lanced down. Jerry wasn't caught flatfooted. He pulled the Spad into a turn, and the German crate lanced by him.

They faced each other, fencing for position, and the German started to climb. That was when Jerry noticed the ships nearest him.

THE Spad was Jake's, and the Fokker belonged to the leader of the German patrol. As Jerry watched, somehow, out of the corner of his eye, Jake hammered the Fokker with a solid burst. To Jerry, it seemed as if the lead missed the plane by inches, but the exhausts of the Fokker suddenly spewed black smoke, and the Mercedes stuttered distressfully. The ship went off in a flat glide, the pilot pounding at the guns, and it passed within twenty feet of Jerry. Suddenly his entire attention was drawn to the pilot's face. A long scar ran along that part of the jaw which was not hidden by the helmet, and the thin lips seemed somehow familiar. Jerry glanced quickly at the markings of the ship. It was Wilster!

Jake was off to the side, his Spad parallel to the Fokker, leaning over the coaming, waving at the German crate. He wasn't going to commit any mistakes this time.

Jerry roared at the top of his lungs, although he knew it was useless.

"Don't let the louse go, Jake! Take him! He's playing you for a sucker!"

Even as he spoke the words, two things happened. Wilster's ship roared out, full of power, and turned towards the loafing Williams. The Spandaus spoke, and even at the distance, Jerry could see the surprise and the pain on Jake's face as the slugs hit him. Then Jerry's opponent came into the picture.

He hadn't forgotten him, and he was in good position as the Fokker came in. Jerry dropped off on one wing, then angled back. His burst almost carried away the cockpit of the Fokker.

Then he turned his attention to Wilster. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Jake's Spad falling, and it was a roaring mass of flames. The German was coming at Jerry from the side, and he twisted quickly out of the way, his heart filled with a seething, insane hatred.

He snapped over in a roll, the Hisso pulsing with power; and as the Fokker flashed in front of him, he snapped a short burst at it. He saw the lead hit. It hammered into the Mercedes, and he saw the slugs glance off the Spandaus on the cowl. Then he drew away.

The Fokker was falling slowly, and Wiltser was hammering at the guns and working at the throttle. Jerry came right up beside him.

Wiltser looked across the space that separated them, and his hands flashed up in an empty gesture. He smiled crookedly, as if to say, "Well, Yank, there is

nothing we can do until another day. I am helpless." Jerry knew what the man was thinking; that he would let him go, or try to herd him down on the Allied side of the lines. But he shook his head.

He turned the Spad slowly, and he could see the change of expression on Wiltser's face as the Vickers bore on him. The man was terror-stricken, and his frantic gestures drew Jerry's lips into a tight, merciless grin.

As the guns began to talk, and the lead started to hammer into the cockpit, Jerry could see Wiltser trying frenziedly to open the safety belt. But the lead prevented him. It nailed him to the pit. It hammered his head into a bloody, unrecognizable mass of pulp. It sieved his chest and cut into his belly.

Jerry held the trips down until the man was merely a bunch of bloody rags, then he turned his attention to the rest of the ship. He hosed it thoroughly, and finally it burst into flame.

The hate was still in his eyes, and his lips moved slowly.

"How did you like the flavor of lead, you louse? How does it feel to die? Jake said there'd be coffins for aces, but what's left of you they can put in a spoon."

Then the Fokker hit the ground, far below, and Jerry turned his crate for home. His eyes were clear and his lips had lost the lines of cruelty, and there was no taste of ashes in his mouth.

THE END

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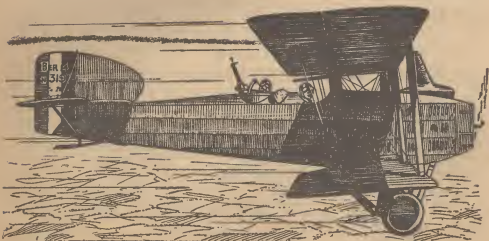
by J. JAY BLAIR

The thunder of wings in a crimson sky and the snarl of whistling lead! This was the music a pilot loved, if his heart was in its proper place! They couldn't play that tune loud enough for Brett Comstock!

THE war did not end during the last week in June.

We all know that now. It is a matter of history that it ended in an armistice on November 11th, with victory for the Allies. There are probably no more than a handful of men now alive who know, and remember with a quake, how close, how heartrendingly close, it came to ending that last week in June with a complete and shattering victory for the other side, and how that Friday a single lad in a single plane with a single gun deflected the course of history.

One of that handful is now a colonel; he sits in his office in Washington, thumbing plans, blueprints, and routine orders, and occasionally glancing out at the high



blue sky with more than a hint of nostalgia in his keen gray eyes. Though he is nowhere near retirement age, his hair is almost white; across his breast dances a modest row of ribbons.

But his hair was not white in 1918; it was dark brown, curly, and clipped close to his head the better to accommodate a flying helmet. The breast of his tunic held only the silver wings of a pilot, and instead of a colonel, he was plain Second Lieutenant Brett Comstock, B Flight leader of the 22nd Pursuit. And instead of gazing idly out through a window, he was on a certain Tuesday afternoon peering anxiously up past the trailing edge of his upper wing, and striving desperately to get a few more meters altitude out of his Nieuport 28.

Above him the Rumpler floated serenely along, scornfully oblivious of his presence, maddeningly safe at close to seven thousand meters. Brett's Nieuport could make 6500; by gently jockeying the stick and readjusting his carbureter manette, he got 6600. But no more. Not another foot could he lift her. He bit his lip in chagrin, and curled his fingers in readiness around the trigger grips on his stick. After nosing down for a moment to gain what speed he could, he hauled the little ship up into a brutal zoom, and squeezed.

But the thin air of four miles up mushed out from under his wings like a puddle under a heavy footstep. The ship rocked drunkenly, its control surfaces practically useless. His spray of tracer swept crazily across the sky, nowhere near its target. The next moment the Nieuport was whirling into a tight, fast spin.

It took him only a few seconds to get it out, but in those few seconds he had dropped nearly a thousand feet.

"I'll be double damned to three hells," he growled.

But back came his stick, and the Nieu-

port was climbing again. No matter what else, Brett was stubborn. There was a Boche, and a Boche more than ten miles behind the Allied lines. The sight made him furious. And the fact that the Jerries in the Rumpler refused to pay him the slightest attention redoubled his rage. Calmly they went on slanting across the back areas in great, obtuse V's, snapping their photographs if and when they pleased, while he in his Nieuport struggled vainly to get within striking distance.

Every time he reached his ceiling of 6600, or thereabouts, he tried a burst. But every time he zoomed to fire, he fell into a spin, and every spin left him floundering a thousand feet lower. And if he attempted a burst from a lower level, it stood not the faintest chance of even grazing the German ship. He could see the Boche observer's head lean over the cowl; Brett could imagine his leer of amusement.

"By God, you've got to come down some time!"

Brett was right, and the time was near. The Rumpler, its task doubtless completed, banked gently and headed toward the lines. Brett narrowly avoided another spin as he turned to follow, four or five hundred meters below the two-seater's tail. For a dozen miles he stayed there, neither losing nor gaining a foot, the throaty howl of his exhausts deafening him, the bitter cold of the high altitude striking through his Sidcot suit remorselessly. But when a clump of black archie bursts, well below his wing-tip, told him that he was crossing the lines, he suddenly thought to look at his gas gauge. He ground his teeth.

The Rumpler with a much larger tank might not start its glide for another fifteen or twenty minutes. By that time Brett would be down to his last few litres, and many miles in Germany. To continue the chase was worse than hopeless; it was suicide. Shaking his fist over his wind-

shield, he wheeled the Nieuport back toward the south, and started a long glide.

From that staggering altitude he could not descend in one swoop without bursting his ear-drums; he began tracing a zig-zag course, side-slipping, gliding, then spiralling. Just under 3000 he flattened out for a moment over a narrow strip of cloud, then canting up vertical, dropped through it like a stone. Swishing out into clear air underneath, he ruddered into a steep glide again, only to jerk up straight in his seat as if a bucket of ice-water had been dumped down his back.

There was a plane, square in front of him. A big two-seater, with wide, blunt-tipped wings and a high fuselage. By sheer chance he was swooping right down onto its tail, in exact position for a raking burst. Had he planned every move, his attack could not have been more perfect. What luck! He grabbed excitedly for his triggers.

But as he squeezed a chattering volley out of his guns, the biplane swept into a sudden bank, eluding his tracers deftly. And immediately Brett was swamped in sick horror. For now he saw what had been invisible to him before. The staring French cocardes on the upper surfaces of the wings; the tri-colored striped rudder!

What a ghastly mistake! He zoomed clear and levelled off. The two-seater, which he now saw was a Breguet, slowly straightened out, both pilot and observer eyeing him closely. Brett waggled his wings, and made motions with his free hand over his cowl, trying to convey his belated recognition. He thought he could see a sneer on the face of the observer. Brett didn't blame him. It was a wonder the fellow hadn't met his misplaced assault with a blast of steel by way of reply.

BRETT said as much, later. The Breguet belonged to the 144th French observation, quartered at the other end

of the same drome as the 22nd American Pursuit. Brett landed first, and ran over to the French tarmac in time to meet the occupants as they climbed down. He made his apologies, clumsily perhaps, but with obvious sincerity. The two French fliers, pulling off their helmets and coats, listened in silence; he wondered if they understood English.

"Eet ees nothing," said the pilot shortly. "Anyone, he can make the meestake. We will forget it, please, yes?"

It was then that Brett, with an uneasy laugh, made his remark about half expecting a volley in reply. The pilot shrugged, and turned away. But the observer recoiled visibly. He was a tall, lean chap with aristocratic features and deep-set dark eyes. His burning stare transfixed Brett on the spot, his pale cheeks turned crimson, his thin lips worked with emotion. He appeared to conquer himself with an effort. With a curt, stiff bow from the waist, he walked quickly away without saying a word. Brett thought that his steps reeled slightly.

An officer who had overheard the talk took Brett's elbow and led him aside. "You said the wrong thing then, *mon camarade*."

"Why—I was only trying to make my excuses. I meant—"

"Yes, I know. But you do not know the *sergeant-pilote* Moreau, eh? His story, No? . . . He was not always sergeant. He was formerly *capitan*, with *Les Cicognes*, premier pursuit escadrille of France. An excellent pilot, you understand; six victories, confirmed. But one day, near Rheims, he made a like mistake. Only more serious. He shot down a Salmson *reglage* plane, to find afterwards the pilot was his own brother."

"My God!" exclaimed Brett, horrified.

"A mistake, naturally. No one wished to charge him. But he insisted on the court-martial, and directed his own verdict. Loss of officer's rank, forfeiture of

all future pay, and service as an observer instead of pilot. A punishment which, of course, is nothing compared to the reproaches of his own conscience."

Walking back toward his own end of the field, Brett cursed himself, and the war in general. What a maladroitness he had! The error in the beginning was bad enough, but understandable. Keyed up to terrific tension, knowing full well that giving the foe the first shot might mean giving away the victory, a man was almost forced under such circumstances to act first and think later. What a hell this was they all lived in! To deliberate slaughter must be added the risk of unintentional death. By God, he'd never do that again!

He was astonished to find headquarters at the 22nd crowded with an excited group of pilots, and the squadron medico just emerging from the C.O.'s private room, shaking his head.

"What the devil is going on?" demanded Brett.

"It's Major Fisher," Wes Foley told him. "He was showing that new grease-ball how to swing a prop. Must have been a short-circuit. The motor popped off, and the prop threw him twenty feet."

"You don't mean—*killed him?*"

The doctor heard the question. "No. He's lucky. He'll pull around all right, but he'll be on his back for a month or so. Right leg broken in three places, above the knee. Oh, that's you, Comstock? He asked if you were back; you'd better go in and see him. He's over in his hutment."

The C.O. was stretched on his cot, white-faced with pain, and cursing his luck bitterly. "Damned fool! I should have known better. . . But I'm not going to any of their blasted hospitals. I'm staying right here. You'll have to help me with things, Brett. You're senior leader."

"You bet, major. We'll handle things okay. How's the leg now?"

"Full of red-hot needles. Nuts to the leg. Listen. I'm supposed to be at an army staff conference in LaFerte, at four o'clock. You'll have to go in my place. Right away, or you'll be late."

"A staff conference!" cried Brett. "But what do I know—"

"Don't worry. All you have to do is listen, and take orders. There aren't many Yanks in this sector; the British and French generals lay the plans. But we ought to be represented. Walker's got the car waiting; he knows where the place is. Better get going."



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STOPPING only to remove his flying suit and substitute an overseas cap for helmet and goggles, Brett hurried to the open car and was whirled at top speed over a dozen miles of vile, crowded roads. He was just in time; when he was admitted to the small, map-papered room in the cellar of a warehouse, it was already crowded. An American infantry colonel and his aide; half a dozen French officers of various ranks—all higher than Brett's—an even larger number of British, headed by Major-General Wygant, army chief, at the head of the table.

Remembering the C.O.'s advice, Brett slipped into a chair in the corner and merely used his ears. By the time he had listened for twenty minutes to the discussion, he had a pretty clear idea of the tactical situation on the Front. It was precarious; dangerously so. For months one German push had followed another, until now the Allies admittedly had their backs to the wall—the wall being the river Marne. Another break-through on a large scale would mean the fall of Paris; the fall of Paris would mean utter defeat.

And there was a spot where such a break might succeed, if the Boches only guessed it. At St. Voile, less than thirty miles from this room, one French division was holding a sector big enough for two. It was due for relief; overdue. But reserves were well-nigh used up, other sectors, too, were under heavy pressure, and transport was jammed. The British outfit that was expected to take over St. Voile was still in the lines, up north. Even if they were shipped down immediately, they would have to have some rest before taking over new trench assignments.

"Saturday, at the very earliest," was their colonel's estimate.

"Well, get them shifted as rapidly as possible," said General Wygant. "And then keep them in billets, where they can be rushed up in case of emergency. God knows what may happen by Saturday. If

Fritz guesses that our condition is so—"

"I don't think he's guessed much." The speaker was a French major in trench coat and steel helmet, plainly just back from the lines. "The outfit opposite us at St. Voile seems to be a very weak one. Poor morale. We've taken a hundred prisoners in the last day and a half."

"That sounds encouraging," nodded the army chief. "If they were thinking of a shove, they'd have shock troops in there."

"I beg pardon, sir." Brett had not been asked a question, but he thought his information might mean something. He described briefly how he had found a Rumpler taking photographs in the region behind the St. Voile sector, that very afternoon.

"Where did you say he was? Here, show me on the map."

Brett traced with his finger the Rumpler's course.

"Gad, that's odd. He was right in back of St. Voile, yes. But why should they want pictures of Sansette? There's nothing there but that big concentration camp for prisoners. Damned if I understand that."

There was considerable further discussion; before the meeting broke up, General Wygant spoke to Brett.

"I'm going to send up special orders to the 144th French, on your field. I want them to carry out extra observation on the German area beyond St. Voile, for the next few days; see if we can't discover what Fritz has up his sleeve. Your Nieuports can furnish escort protection, and also use your eyes. We can't afford any surprises."

Brett saluted gravely, and departed.

BUT the next day was far from suited for observation. Although it was not raining, a heavy blanket of clouds lay just above the hilltops, solid and gray. They waited until mid-morning; but there was no wind, and the clouds did not dis-

solve. Finally it was decided to make an attempt; it might be clearer up over the lines.

A courier ran across the field; shortly four or five Breguets were warming up. One after the other they lumbered into the open, roared loudly for a few seconds, and then soared up into the mist. After them the Nieuports seemed like delicate, graceful insects, leaping at one bound nearly out of sight.

A dozen feet off the ground Brett held his nose level for ten seconds, to gain maximum speed. Then he zoomed steeply. Dank gray vapor surrounded him, lapping his wing-tips, being torn to shreds by his whirling propeller. For half a minute he could see nothing; neither sky nor earth nor other ships. He was lost in a blank void while his exhausts clamored, and his altimeter needle climbed the scale. Five hundred meters, eight hundred, a thousand—and abruptly he emerged into a different world. A tumbling floor of crystal white clouds stretched beneath him, as far as the eye could see; above was the clear blue dome of the sky and dazzling sunlight. Three Breguets circled each other, half a mile to the north; another was just lifting itself from the cloud bank. A couple of Nieuports pursued each other playfully, waiting.

In another minute they were in two formations, the pursuit ships uppermost, headed for the lines. Headed, at least, for where they thought the lines must be, for the ground was totally invisible. And it remained invisible; there were no holes. Brett perceived that this was no kind of a day for observation. Twice one of the Nieuports dropped down through the layer, and came up again, the pilot shaking his head. There was no room for a Breguet to fly safely between the earth and the bottom of the cloud bank, and see anything. When one of the Breguets tried the same thing, and came up spouting a red flare, the two-seaters gave up the

effort. They turned back southward, hoping to be able to find their home field.

But if observation was impossible, combat was not. Conditions up here were ideal, except that against that bright white floor a plane was easily seen for miles. Therefore they climbed, rising swiftly until altimeter needles hovered around the six thousand meter mark. In fact, perhaps they climbed too high; for more than an hour, as they zig-zagged back and forth in icy emptiness, they seemed to be alone in the world. It was Brett who finally spotted the tiny specks, far below.

But if the Germans were visible at a long distance, so were Brett and his comrades. No sooner had the five Nieuports tipped into a plunge than the Boches turned. They were Fokkers, but there were only three of them, and plainly they were not eager for an odds-on scrap. Brett steepened his dive, and warmed his guns briefly. The Fokkers were diving, too, but the Nieuports with their start from superior altitude were gaining. The cloud floor, however, was getting closer and closer. Brett shoved his ship practically to the vertical. With ears cracking, a gale tearing at his helmet, and motor racing madly, he annihilated distance in one last roaring swoop.

A fleeing dark shape materialized in his ring sight; his fingers closed savagely on the grips. The shape did not swerve, but suddenly it seemed to fade away like a ghostly figure in a dream, and he was plunging headlong into dank gray gloom. A gentle pressure on the stick brought him surving up into light again. But there was nothing to be seen. His intended victim had vanished into the mist; so had the rest of the Fokkers. His comrades had disappeared in pursuit.

With a growl of disgust he swooped down into the layer of murk again. This time he half dove, half slid, until he dropped out into the thin strip of clear air. It was dangerously thin, sometimes

less than a hundred meters; for a minute he flew in wide circles with his wing-tips seeming to brush the tree-tops. He caught sight of another plane, beyond a low ridge, but it vanished in a zoom before he could be sure whether it was a Fokker or a Nieuport. He banked in that direction immediately, but could not find it again.

Following winding valleys and zooming over mist-wrapped crests, he spent another five minutes in fruitless search for those German planes, which by this time were doubtless miles away. The cloud layer was obviously a perfect medium for escape from an unwanted combat. He climbed up through it once more to the clear void of the higher altitudes, but now there was nothing in sight here either. Fokkers and Nieuports; all had disappeared. He was alone, and abruptly it struck him that he didn't have the slightest idea where he was.

The hour's flying in many different directions at ceiling, followed by the wild dashing back and forth through the clouds, had lost him all sense of location. Once more he dropped down close to the carpet. This time he found himself over wooded ridges; to keep clear of the crests he had to fly half in the clouds, where he could see little or nothing. He zoomed, held level for a couple of minutes, and then mushoomed down again.

Five minutes later he was more confused than ever. He didn't know whether he was over German or Allied soil, and wasn't even sure in which direction he was flying. Frequent turns and banks had gotten his compass spinning crazily, and skimming the earth this way he couldn't see far enough to recognize a landmark before it rushed past below him.

SUDDENLY he uttered a cry of relief. A row of hangars loomed out of the mist, shot past beneath. Quickly he came around in a bank. He was familiar with all the dromes in that sector; certainly a

second look and he could recognize this one, and get his bearings. He dropped until his wheels fairly skimmed the level field, and stared toward the buildings anxiously.

He saw plainly several Allied planes standing on the tarmac, or just inside the open doors of the hangars. One large one that must have been a Handley-Page; a couple of two-seaters that looked like Salmsons. But before he spotted any detail to tell him what drome it was, he had to zoom to avoid running full tilt into the pole holding the windsock. Whisking through the lower fringes of the clouds in a wide curve, however, he felt better. At least it must be an Allied field; he was therefore on the right side of the lines. All he had to do was to land, ask directions, and the rest would be simple.

He found the wind-sock again, kept it on his right. Dodging a tree, he rocked down toward the open field. His left hand reached for his throttle as his right jockeyed the stick. He was not looking toward the buildings, but he heard plainly the raucous pound of a machine gun.

His head twisted sharply. Against the dark background the vivid crimson flashes of the belching muzzle were plain as day, and in the same instant he felt the ominous plucking of bullets in the fabric of his fuselage. His reaction was instinctive and, fortunately, instantaneous. His left hand, instead of closing the throttle, slammed it wide, and his right hauled the stick back in his lap. The Nieuport sprang up into the clouds in one leap.

Stunned with amazement, he flew in blind circles for several minutes. Fired on from an Allied drome—God, were ground crews subject to this madness, too! He wagged his head in mute despair. After a bit he glided again, but when the ground came into view he could not find the drome, and realized that his gas was beginning to run low. Once more he climbed through the clouds, levelled

off long enough for his compass to steady down, and then headed due south. When less than two minutes' fuel remained, he crossed his fingers and once more ducked downward. To his astonishment he found himself no more than a mile from home.

"Your compass must have been a little drunk," said the adjutant after he had described his experience, in operations tent.

"But, damn it, it brought me home all right," protested Brett.

"But there's no Allied drome ten minutes north of here."

"I know it. Yet there were Allied ships on that field."

"Well, then, you must have been on this side of the lines."

"I *couldn't* have been on this side. And besides, why did they shoot at me, then?"

"Are you sure you didn't dream that part?" asked Wes Foley.

"Come out and I'll show you the bullet holes in the ship."

Wes shrugged. The adjutant laughed shortly and lighted a cigarette. The operations clerk whistled tunelessly. Obviously none of them believed that he had been fired on from a friendly drome. Such a mistake might be made in the air, but hardly on the ground. Brett didn't permit himself to believe that, however. But if it was on the other side of the lines, how come Allied planes were standing there? What was it all about? Was he really screwy, like the compass?

Shortly after noon a breeze came up, and by mid-afternoon the cloud bank was pretty well dispersed. C Flight took one Breguet formation over for a look-see, and at four-thirty Brett led B Flight off the ground again to escort a second V of observation ships. As he swung into position, he noted that one of those Breguets was Number 10. That would be the sergeant Moreau, then, in the rear cockpit. Brett peered downward; the observer's face was turned toward him.

Brett made a casual gesture of greeting with his free hand, but there was no response. The observer deliberately ducked inside of his cockpit.

"Oh, okay," muttered Brett, flushing.

HE QUICKLY forgot that little rebuff, however, in the next hour. The Breguets scattered over the German territory behind the St. Voile sector, and Brett's patrol tried to keep them all in sight at once. Since the sector was not large, this was not difficult, but it wasn't long before the Fokkers came out of the northeast. A running scrap began, and once begun, it never really ceased.

The Boches did not consider their own numbers great enough to make a bold frontal attack—they were only six—so they played at guerrilla tactics. Two or three of them would pester one of the Breguets while the rest waited high above. When the Nieuports hurried to the assistance of the beleaguered two-seater, the upper group would dive. There would be a few hectic moments of tangled combat, ending in the outright flight of the Fokkers into deep Germany. The Yanks, not daring to desert their mission and follow, would climb back, and a few minutes later the same indecisive sort of encounter would be repeated.

Brett ground his teeth on a curse of frustration. Escort duty was not new to him. He hated it. It was always like this, or worse. Either the Jerries waited until a man was in an impossible position, and then jumped him with overwhelming numbers, or else they played at this stabbing in the back. By God, he'd spoil this game.

The Fokkers were well off to the west, climbing. Brett climbed too, but not directly toward them. After a few minutes he saw two of them break away and slant down toward one of the Breguets that was wheeling over the Vellon road. Brett angled a little more in that direction, but

did not cease climbing. Even when he saw the two pursuit ships begin darting at the Breguet's flanks, spitting threads of tracer, he kept on climbing with his comrades at his back. A last powerful zoom, another slight change of direction, and he was leading his formation to the attack. But not upon the foes close to the two-seater—upon the larger group waiting above.

The four Fokkers, not foreseeing this unusual maneuver, waited until it was too late to flee. The Nieuports rushed on them with snarling guns, and in a moment it was a flashing, swirling dogfight with every man for himself and no initial advantage to either side.

Brett slammed out a volley on general principles; the Boche at which it was aimed cut away in a steep spiral. He didn't follow, but curved aside to look over his shoulder. Seeing his mates well launched on the job of keeping those Jerries busy for a while, he lost no time, but forgot the dogfight as if it had never started. A shove at the stick and a kick on the rudder, and he was careening down in a dive toward the Breguet and its two assailants.

This time, instead of coming from the side, he came vertically, and the speed of his approach was terrific. If the Germans saw him coming at all, they misjudged the moment of his arrival. One Fokker had just delivered a burst and was wheeling aside as the observer replied. Brett landed on its tail with a swoop and a howl. His fingers clamped the triggers down, and his guns poured forth steel like water.

The Fokker sheered off in a desperate lunge. But what started as an attempt to escape continued as a death ride. The German pilot, riddled in the middle of his last maneuver, fell forward in his cockpit. His stick jammed against the wall of the fuselage, and the lunge became a turn, the turn a spin. The spin tightened, steepened; fluttering bits of

torn fabric marked the downward course of the doomed plane.

But by that time Brett was whirling toward the other Boche. The second Fokker seized a last opportunity to drive home a volley at the Breguet, and then turned to flee. Brett, flashing past, let out a gasp of dismay; the timing of his maneuver must have been a second too slow. The two-seater, on which he plainly saw the number 10, was lurching into a twisting turn, and black smoke rippled along its side.

The fact that he had apparently arrived just too late infuriated him, and his fury turned upon the Boche. He cut off the Fokker's attempt to flee with a ranging burst, forced it into a bank, and then attacked it with systematic, merciless savagery. That German pilot was a veteran, a member of one of the Kaiser's finest *staffels*; Brett remembered later noticing the Purple Comet insignia on its side. But he might as well have been a novice. It would have made no difference.

The Fokker snapped through an Immelmann. The Nieuport followed; coming out higher. The Boche whipped into a spiral. Brett spiraled tighter. The Fokker tried a series of split-air turns, but the Nieuport gained with every turn, and was clawing at the black-crossed rudder with twin streams of steel. When the Boche zoomed desperately, it was too late, and Brett found his target before the Fokker got out of range.

His crackling burst crashed into the Fokker's mid-section like a blast from the doors of hell. More than one tracer must have found the gas tank. There was a puff of flame and smoke, followed by a bigger one. Then there was nothing but fluttering fragments of fabric, and a gaunt, flame-wrapped skeleton plunging to complete destruction.

Brett whirled out into a circle, gazing downward. He was surprised to see the Breguet, still intact, but in a dead-stick

glide. That tongue of smoke, then, could not have been the tank exploding, but merely a backfire from a crippled motor. It was already low, but under perfect control. As he watched, it slipped into a safe landing on a patch of smooth ground next to the road, and rolled to a stop. Brett shrugged. Moreau's career was finished. At least that was better than outright destruction. And there was always the chance of escape.

The dogfight above had already ended; two Fokkers were down, and the rest in flight. The last twenty minutes of the patrol were comparatively peaceful, and the observers were able to do some observing.

"**L**ITTLE activity in the front lines," the adjutant reported to General Wygant, later. "But farther back, several concentrations of bivouacked troops, and considerable artillery in position, though not firing. Quite a lot of traffic on the roads. Some of it along the sides, not moving; either stalled, or waiting for orders."

"That may mean a lot, or nothing," commented the army chief in worried tones. "Sounds like a quiet sector, but those troops may be just poised for a blow. Gad, I wish I knew! . . . Keep watching them, at all costs, and let me know immediately of any change."

The next day, however, produced no further information, because rain and clouds both made flying impossible. The result was that by Friday morning the tension was redoubled. Everyone felt that the day had come; the feeling of a decisive blow was in the very air.

Perhaps it was over-eagerness that made Brett's hand unsure. Taking off just after dawn to test the air, his half warmed motor choked and sputtered; forced to land in haste on ploughed ground across the road, he came down just hard enough to crack an axle and both

braces. So that all day long, while the others were coming back and going out again as fast as tanks could be refuelled, he was cursing and sweating in the hangars, helping his mechanics repair the plane.

It was after four before the job was finished. B Flight was out; A Flight was not due to start on the last patrol for three quarters of an hour. Brett could not wait; he took off alone, his first violation of precedent and orders. The reports during the day had been of no movement on the ground, but of unusual activity in the air. Four Breguets had been shot down, and three Nieuports had failed to return; the Boches were obviously striving to blind the Allied observation. Which was just why Brett was doubly anxious to see what was to be seen.

He was slanting over toward St. Voile, and not yet quite to the lines, when he saw the Breguet ahead. It was crossing the lines out of the northeast, angling toward him; nothing more than curiosity made him swerve nearer. It did not alter its course; in a few moments he was sliding past above it. A glance showed him the insignia of the 144th on its fuselage; a sharper look caught the number. Number 10.

His first thought was, "Why, that's Moreau." Then he gave a start. No, it couldn't be. Moreau had been shot down Wednesday afternoon, 48 hours ago. Had he read that number incorrectly? He banked, and looked again. No; no mistake. The number was certainly a 10, and the markings of the 144th were unmistakable. He stared in amazement.

Ah, he had it! That ship had gone down only slightly damaged, the other afternoon. The Frenchman must have somehow eluded capture, repaired their motor, and escaped. They were now on their way back. Brett swung closer, only to get the shock of his life. From the

rear cockpit of the Breguet came a warning blast of tracer, across his path.

He swerved off sharply, then for a moment sat petrified. His mind strove to reason calmly. Breguet number 10; that was Moreau's ship. Then Moreau must be firing on him—but no, that was incredible! If there was one observer in the world who would never again make the mistake of firing on an Allied plane, that man was Moreau. The two-seater had last been seen, by Brett himself, in Germany; it was coming from Germany now. Therefore it had Germans in it. No other conclusion was possible.

Just to be sure, he edged in close again. Another blast of fire came from the Breguet, this time grazing his wing-tip. That was enough. He did not yet know the whys and wherefores, but he was convinced that those were Boches in that plane. And once convinced, Brett lost no time taking steps.

He ducked, and nosed up below the two-seater's belly. Suspicious, it banked, so that his burst missed its target. The observer was making no bones about shooting, now; the swivelled guns spat viciously. Brett swung, circled once, and then hung on his prop again. This time, when his fingers closed on the grips, his aim was perfect. A short volley smashed into the Breguet's motor, and its prop jerked stiffly to a halt.

If he had needed any further proof of something queer, he got it now. Although they were five miles inside Allied territory, the two-seater attempted at first to glide toward the lines. But Brett took up position on its flank, and by threatening bursts forced it to turn in the opposite direction, and all the way to the ground he clung close to its path, watching every move.

THE FIELD it chose was not a bad one, but the pilot must have been rattled. He touched his wheels askew,

ripped off half his landing gear, and when he settled the second time the big ship somersaulted awkwardly to end in a heap on its back. Brett, intensely curious, quickly wheeled and put his own plane in a glide. Avoiding the rough spots, he landed safely and rolled to a stop a short distance away.

It seemed very quiet; ominously so. He was half way between the communication trenches and the artillery positions; there were no troops in sight. Hastily he jumped down and ran toward the wreck. To his surprise he found two dead flyers, both of them in German uniform. The observer must have loosened his belt, to be ready to flee; he had been tossed fifty feet against a rock. The pilot was jammed in his inverted cockpit with a broken neck.

But Brett found something else. All the extra space in the rear cockpit was filled with rifles, tied in bundles of half a dozen, and with cartons of ammunition, crammed in every nook. Puzzled, he picked up a clip-board which had fallen to the ground. Instead of the usual map, it held a photograph, a mosaic made up of several pictures fitted together. He recognized the terrain instantly; it included most of the St. Voile sector. The curious feature was a ruled line drawn in white ink, stretching from the prison camp at Sansette to a point on the other side of the lines.

Studying it, his mind gradually began to put two and two together. The staff conference, and the peculiar events of the last few days, assumed their proper places. The Rumpler that had been taking these very photos, on which a route was now marked. The German outfit in the lines, from which prisoners were taken so easily—to be sent, of course, to the concentration camp at Sansette. The Breguet, shot down intact on Wednesday, and reappearing in the air today, with a German crew, and a load of rifles and cartridges.

That strange, lost drome under the clouds, which he had been so sure was in Germany, and yet which had been filled with Allied planes—why, that was the other end of the white line!

Glancing up, he saw a Salmson appearing out of the northeast, on that same marked course. He saw it all now, complete, like a jig-saw puzzle that falls into form, and his teeth clenched in despair. Frantically he looked about him. There was no telephone, not even a building or a wire in sight; no sign of soldiers within a mile. No way for him to give a warning, or to call for assistance; and yet no time to lose. What had to be done, he must do himself, alone, and unsupported.

He ran at top speed to his Nieuport. Leaping in, he gunned the motor wide, and lifted off the ground with a swoop. He climbed as fast as the straining Gnome would lift him, straight up toward that Salmson. Nearing its level, he could see the American cocardes on its wings, and

his heart turned cold. The observer was leaning over the side to peer at him with alert curiosity; almost too alert. Brett hesitated; his hand shook. Might he be wrong? Could his reasoning be false? Were those Boches in that ship, bent on a diabolic scheme to spring a trap on the weak point in the Allied line? Or was it what it appeared to be; an observation bus on its way home?

He could not be absolutely sure. That was what turned his blood to ice in his veins, and made his scalp crawl. He could not be sure. He had to take a chance. Either he was committing, not one error, but a whole series, and the most horrible kind. Murdering his allies, perhaps his own comrades, deliberately. But on the other hand, if he was right, and did not act, he would be permitting the Boches to achieve a master stroke which might well turn the tide of the war. In any event, the blame would rest entirely upon his own shoulders.



NEXT MONTH—



We have already received from the dynamic pen of Reg Dinsmore one of the most exciting and inspiring novelettes of the sky that we have ever had the pleasure to read, and are happy to offer our readers, for the March Issue of this magazine—

ORDERS BE DAMNED!

By Reg Dinsmore

And also, in the same issue, we announce the return of Molloy and McNamara! —the same hard-fisted hellions of the airways who have thrilled us so many times before. They come sky-riding again in William Hartley's dramatic **SALUTE TO SATAN!**

March Issue



On Sale January 25

Plus stories and features by O. B. Myers, William O'Sullivan, Frederick Blakeslee and others—all in this one banner issue!

He gritted his teeth and let off a brief blast. The guns of the Salmson spoke promptly in reply. It was not proof positive; any Allied observer might do that. But the sight of the tracers stabbing at his wingtip seemed to precipitate his indecision. He whirled his Nieuport into a climbing turn, centered his sights on a round belly, and squeezed his triggers in earnest. Twenty seconds later he saw the Salmson go down in flames and a prayer spluttered on his livid lips.

"May God have mercy on me if I'm wrong!"

Two more planes were surging out of the northeast already. One was a Handley-Page, as big and as slow as a Mack truck; the other was a D-H. He tackled the D-H first, and had a tough struggle; that observer, whoever he was, had a keen eye and a quick hand. Brett took two bursts in his center section before the D-H toppled into a spin, and one of those bursts put his left gun permanently out of commission.

THE Handley-Page was by this time nearly to Sansette. Brett hastened in pursuit, as it dipped low over the prison camp where thousands of Germans crowded the stockade under guard of hardly a hundred sentries. His Nieuport rushed in close, guns spitting angrily, but before the big bomber lumbered into a slow turn, he thought he saw a bulky bundle thrown from its cockpit. That removed the lingering doubts from his mind, in this particular case at least, and he attacked with savage fury. Before the Handley-Page could complete a circle and cross above the prison camp a second time, he sent it crashing down out of control.

It was about this time that a phone call came into the drome of the 22nd Pursuit. "Say, have you got a crazy man in your outfit, or have the Jerries stolen one of your ships lately?"

"What are you talking about?" demand-

ed the adjutant. "What the hell is wrong?"

"One of your ships is over here, above Sansette, jumping on our own planes. He's shot down three already, and he's after another. For God's sake, send somebody over and knock him out of the air! He's nuts!"

But that time Brett was unquestionably crazy. He had forced himself to cast doubts to the wind, but nevertheless felt as if he were in the midst of a grotesque nightmare. Having once started, he had to carry on, even to the most fantastic extremes. He was attacking everything in sight; halfway measures were impossible. In return every plane in the sky was his enemy, and there were more of them now.

Some Fokkers had appeared; escorts, perhaps. They paid no attention to other Allied insignia, but pounced on his Nieuport savagely. A couple of French Spads came out of the west; that probably meant that they were true to their colors, but after seeing him down a Farman in flames, they fired on him, too. He whirled from one struggle into another, with no time to draw a breath. His one gun was cherry red, the ammunition belt running low.

A Fokker pierced his tail with a handful of bullets; he threw the Nieuport through a renversement. In front of him he saw a broad-winged Caudron bomber sliding down toward the prison camp. If that was one of the renegade planes, it would have a big load. If not—but he dared not doubt. He plunged after its tail. Four ships dogged his own course. His fingers wrapped themselves around his triggers. The Nieuport came up on the slow Caudron hand over fist. His bullets were riddling its fuselage; but other bullets were spitting his own cockpit from three directions at once.

He saw a puff of smoke from the plane ahead; at the same instant his Nieuport leaped sideways as if struck by a gigantic hand. He caught it, lost it, caught it again,

but only for a moment. More bullets raked his tail, and he was spinning. His struggles with the stick had no effect; he realized that his elevator was useless. He waggled the rudder desperately, felt the plane partly flatten out, and then saw a branchless tree rushing right at his face. The gaunt trunk vanished in a dazzling white flash, which dissolved into instant blackness.

GENERAL WYGANT came himself to see Brett in the hospital, two days later. There was something like awe in his manner.

"I hardly know what to say to you, Lieutenant. You took an awful responsibility on your shoulders; thank God you were right! The Boches had planned well, and the plan almost worked. Armed with rifles dropped from the sky, the prisoners could break out of Sansette easily. That would have meant a strong and desperate force in our rear, right where the lines were weakest. The reserve division in billets would have been kept damned busy by those escaped prisoners, and the German thrust at St. Voile which started Saturday at dawn would probably have succeeded marvelously."

"They attacked, at St. Voile?" whispered Brett, his throat like leather from the fumes and smoke he had swallowed while unconscious.

"Yes. But thank to you, the coup by

the German prisoners had already failed, due to lack of rifles. The reserve division, therefore, was rushed into the lines, and managed to throw back the assault with the loss of only a few minor points. Another fresh division went in this morning, and we're doing a little attacking of our own."

Brett smiled faintly.

"Thank God you had plenty of nerve," said the general seriously. "It's tough enough for a man to fight the enemy. To deliberately attack those who may possibly be his friends, if he is wrong . . . well, that takes a unique kind of courage. A kind, I regret to say, that it is not always possible to reward with a piece of bronze."

Brett stared at him intently, a question in his eyes. The general nodded. "Now you know, lieutenant, how a commander feels when circumstances force him to sacrifice a platoon, or perhaps a company, to gain a victory. Yes . . . in one of those planes you shot down there was an American pilot. They tell me he is expected to live," he added quickly.

Which circumstance explains, perhaps, why you will not find the name of Brett Comstock on the official list of decorations awarded by the United States government. For how could the army decorate a man officially for an exploit in the course of which he assaulted a superior officer? After all, army regulations are army regulations, aren't they?

THE END

EXTRA



Remember—when you take a Smith Brothers Cough Drop you get Vitamin A—extra!

Smith Bros. Cough Drops are the only drops containing VITAMIN A

This is the vitamin that raises the resistance of the mucous membranes of the nose and throat to cold infections.



ASEMBLIT

by Frederick
Blakeslee

Solution to
ASEMBLIT No. 20



ABOVE, as you can see—those of you who can read—is the solution of last month's Asemblit. It was tough, I admit, but you've been asking for some rugged problems, and you got it. There were quite a few gents who wrote in to say that they unscrambled it and made the various parts resemble a plane, but they didn't know what it was.

That is not at all surprising, for it's a ship we didn't hear much about. It did plenty of work, and it was a formidable crate. It is a Friedrichshafen Bomber. We're not surprised that you couldn't identify it, for we can just about spell it.

But, my friends, you haven't seen anything yet. We're really going to work, this month, and you'll be tearing your hair out before you put the pieces together. It's all on pages 34 and 35, so get digging in there, chums, get digging!

STORY BEHIND THE COVER



SHIP No. 1 in the above diagram is a Dewoitine D-510. Its speed ranges from 205 m.p.h. at ground level up to 249 m.p.h. at 16,400 ft.

Ship No. 2 is a Marvel Bloch 200. Its speed at ground level is 152 m.p.h.—up to 181 m.p.h. at 13,500 ft.

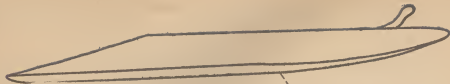
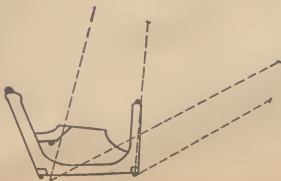
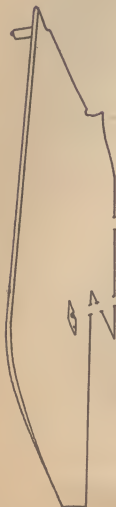
Ship No. 3 is a Farman F-221. Its speed is around 171 m.p.h.

They are all French ships and the object they are bombing is a super-super long distance gun, and what's wrong with it? During the world war the Germans had a gun that shot 75 miles, an unheard of range even to-day. Well, no one knows what the Germans have up their sleeve. The gun on the cover is my idea of what they **MIGHT** turn out.

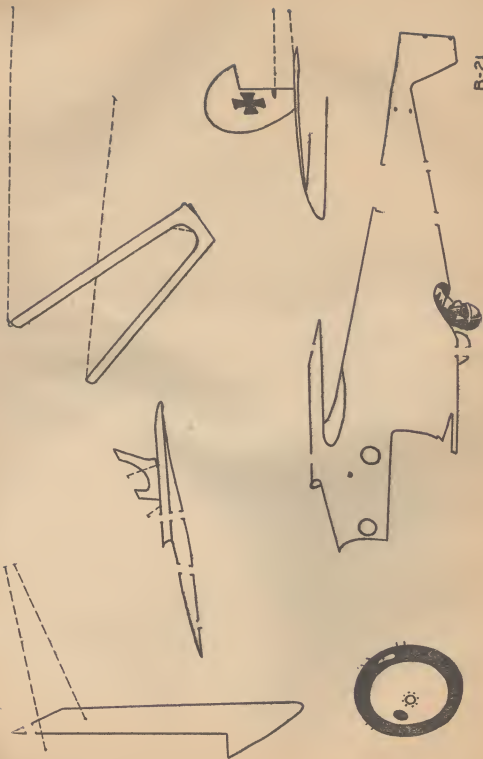
See you next month, pals.

Fred Blakeslee

"ASSEMBLIT" №21



A-21

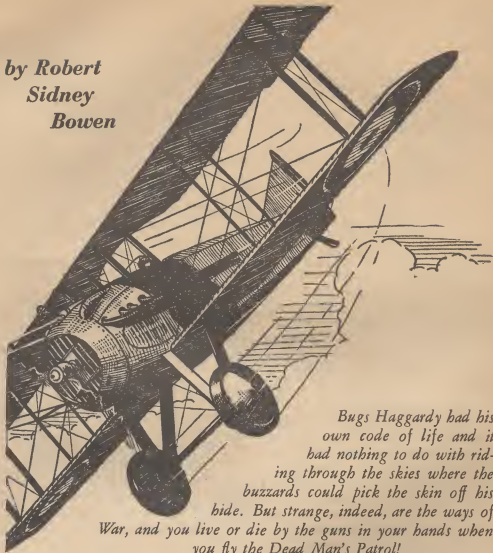


Dead Man's Patrol



Bugs didn't like it when
the hot lead stitched the
open sky.

by Robert
Sidney
Bowen



Bugs Haggardy had his own code of life and it had nothing to do with riding through the skies where the buzzards could pick the skin off his hide. But strange, indeed, are the ways of War, and you live or die by the guns in your hands when you fly the Dead Man's Patrol!

TAKING one last drag on his cigarette, "Bugs" Haggardy snapped the butt out into the gutter and returned his attention to the noonday throng that passed and repassed in front of him. Slouched comfortably against a building wall, the peak of his cap pulled low down over his watery blue eyes, he carefully studied each person as he or she went by. With Bugs, it was strictly business.

Bugs Haggardy was no bum, and he would have resented any such insinuation. Nor was he out of work, either. On the contrary, he was at that very moment con-

ducting a serious bit of business, and had been conducting it steadily ever since he had come to Boston two years before. Prior to that time he had been engaged in his particular line of business in New York City, until the cops developed different ideas. As a matter of simple fact, Bugs Haggardy was a pickpocket, and very skilled at the trade.

On the twenty-first day of April, 1917, Bugs was looking about for a victim. Suddenly he stiffened, and cast an expert glance at a man wearing tailor made clothes, plus a flopping Panama hat, who was in the act of climbing from a taxi.

His eyes gleamed brightly when the man in the Panama hat pulled a wallet from his back pocket and selected a bill from a fat roll of greenbacks. For three long blocks Bugs remained a respectful four paces behind the man in the Panama, but when traffic barred the way at the fourth block, he moved in close, rubbed shoulders with his intended victim, then went to work with quick deft fingers.

In the fraction of a moment the wallet was clasped tightly between his fingers and on its way to his own pocket. But at that moment, the lovely lady known as "luck", kicked him right in the teeth, and a strong hand pressed steely fingers into the flesh of his shoulder. A snap glance upward showed Bugs that the steel fingered hand belonged to the man in the Panama hat.

However, at that self same instant the traffic light went green and the people in back of Bugs began to shove forward, and both he and the owner of the hand on his shoulder were shoved off balance. Quick as a flash, Bugs did a backward twist that would have done credit to any broken field running All-American, yanked himself free from the steel-fingered hand, and darted away into the crowd. Behind him he left considerable commotion, but by the time the howl of "Stop thief!" hit the air, he was half a block up the street and ducking through the swinging doors of a department store.

When he came out a different door he saw a crowd gathered in front of a building down the street. He headed for the crowd with the idea of mingling with it until it was safe to continue on his way in the search of more business. No sooner had he made that decision than he caught sight of Steel Fingers, and a cop, talking with the doorman of the department store he had just left. Seconds later he was in the crowd and elbowing his way in deeper. When he reached the front row he suddenly realized that everybody was listen-

ing to a man in uniform shouting at them from atop a small platform.

"... and we've all got to get in it!" the uniformed man was roaring. "We can't just sit home here while those baby killers wipe civilization from the face of Europe. If we do, we'll soon have them pounding with shot and shell right at our own front doors. Ask yourselves if you'd like to see your mothers, and sisters, and wives, and sweethearts suffer what the women of Belgium have suffered? I ask you, would you?"

Wide, flashing eyes blazed down into Bugs' upturned face, and a stiff finger was jabbed straight at him.

"I ask you!" bellowed the man in uniform. "Would you want to see that happen here?"

Bugs had never even heard of Belgium, and he didn't know whether it was some kind of a country or a new fangled prune whip. So he shook his head.

"Of course not!" the man in uniform thundered, and returned his gaze to include his listeners in general. "But that's just what will happen if we don't roll up our sleeves and put a stop to it. Now, who is first? Who's the first one to show he's got red blood and not water in his veins?"

The blazing eyes swung back toward Bugs. A dryness gripped the pickpocket's throat, and he tried to wiggle around in back of a fat man. It was like trying to squeeze through a brick wall. He couldn't move an inch. Then the stiff finger was pointed at him again.

"Will you go, my man?" came the question.

Bugs gulped, then nodded for no other reason than to get those blazing eyes to look some place else. Instead, though, the man with the blazing eyes clapped his hands, and jerked one up to his sweating brow.

"At's the boy! I salute you, buddy. Step right into the building here, and they'll fix you up. Good luck, buddy.

Your sweetie will be proud of you for this. And your mother, too. You're a man among men, pal!"

With a final flourish of his hand the man in uniform turned back to the crowd. "Now, who's next?" he roared. "Come on, men! Uncle Sam needs you!"

Bugs took advantage of the man's attention being directed elsewhere to slink back into the crowd and make himself very scarce. But he didn't stand a chance. A nearby couple clapped him on the shoulder, shouted things in his ears, and pushed him forward. In very much of a haze, he stumbled up the steps and into the building. Once inside, he turned around to wait his chance to sneak out again, but at that moment Lady Luck kicked him in the teeth again. Standing outside, on the steps, his back to Bugs, was the man in the Panama hat.

Cursing under his breath, Bugs started along the corridor to find another way out. At the end of half a dozen steps, however, a hand touched his shoulder.

"First door to the right," said a voice. "Good luck buddy."

WITH no idea of what it was all about, but acutely conscious of the presence of the wallet-owner out on the building steps, Bugs stumbled down the hall and pushed in through the first door to the right. He had to go some place, and at the moment, any door was a door of escape. But when he passed through he found himself in a room jammed with activity. More men in uniform were seated at desks, barking out words, and making motions with their hands. Others were rushing here and there, and one or two were applying queer-looking instruments to the chests and backs of some men stripped to the waist, or in the nude. A hand holding a pencil came out of nowhere to tap Bugs on the arm.

"Name?"

Bugs whirled and gaped at a business-

like man seated at a desk at his side.

"Huh?" he gulped.

"What's your name?"

"Haggardy. Frank Haggardy. But my pals call me. . ."

"Home address?" the next question cut in.

"River Street," Bugs stammered. "But, listen, what's this all. . .?"

"Next of kin?" the man at the desk rapped at him.

Bugs struggled hard to check his spinning brain.

"Next of who?" he finally got out.

"Kin! Got any relatives?"

That one was easy for Bugs. He shook his head.

"No, I ain't got none. But, listen, Mister, what's. . .?"

It didn't work the second time. The man with the pencil waved it in a gesture for silence, then raced the pencil over a sheet on the desktop. Then he waved the pencil again.

"Strip!" he commanded.

Bugs hesitated, and his hand hovered over the pocket that held his day's "take". Was this a general police round-up? If it was, he—

"Snap into it!" the man at the desk cracked at him. "Get off those clothes. You're the last man, and the truck's waiting. Want to hang around here all day?"

Bugs didn't, and so he began to take off his clothes. A couple of other men were advancing toward him, so it seemed the only thing to do. Then followed fifteen minutes of frenzied action that left him dazed. He was pushed from here to there, thumped on the back and chest, made to jump up and down, bend over, stick his tongue out, and do everything else save tie himself into a knot.

"Okay!" a voice suddenly cut through the fog. "You're fit. Get into your clothes!"

Bugs scrambled into his clothes, jammed his hat on his head, and started

blindly for the nearest door. A hand caught him, however, and a pen was shoved into his own.

"Sign here before you go," he was ordered.

Dazedly he scrawled his name on a sheet of paper shoved at him and dropped the pen.

"Right!" he heard a voice say. "Out that door. Good luck."

A pat on the back was also a shove and he went stumbling through a door and out into brilliant sunshine. But before he could take a deep breath he was hoisted up over the tailboard of a truck to become one of a group of laughing and singing men. Then the truck lurched forward and rolled on down the street. Steadying himself as best he could, Bugs plucked at the sleeve of the man seated next to him.

"Hey, what the hell?" he blurted out. "Is this a pinch? Where we going?"

The man next to him stared into his face in dumbfounded astonishment.

"A pinch?" he echoed and then roared with laughter. "Boy, is that hot? Hell, pal, you're in the army now. You're going to be a soldier."

In that moment the world fell down on top of Bugs' head, left him stunned and gasping for five full seconds. Then suddenly he leaped straight up as though he'd been sitting on a rattlesnake.

"A *soldier*?" he howled. "The hell I am!"

As the last left his lips he more or less pivoted in midair and dived toward the tailboard of the truck. He had one leg thrown over it when a husky man in uniform clamped down on his other ankle.

"Hey! Where do you think you're going?"

"Never mind!" Bugs yowled, and tried to kick his foot free. "I ain't going to be no soldier!"

"No?" the big man growled. "Says you, Mister. You've signed for the duration of this little war. Get back in there,

and none of your lip. You're in the army, now!"

Brute strength accompanied the words, and Bugs Haggardy went flying back into the truck. He landed in a heap, and stared dumbly up into the ring of laughing faces about him.

"In the army?" he heard his own voice coming to him from a long ways off. "My gawd, ain't this a hell of a note?"

Too stunned and bewildered even to hear the laughing jibes of his comrades, Bugs stayed sprawled on the floor of the truck as it rumbled out through Newton and Weston toward Camp Harrison. Of all the things in the world he had never expected to do, six of them had been to join the army. His had never been a life of any kind of conflict in the open. That sort of thing just naturally went against his true nature. Dark streets, and alleys, yes. But fighting, real fighting out in the open, with a chance of getting hurt? Every part of him rebelled and revolted at the thought.

Presently, there being nothing else to do about it, he resigned himself to his fate and vowed to get out of the army at the first opportunity. He hought of the wallet still safely tucked in his pocket. His fingers itched to get it out and explore its contents, but cold reasoning quelled the urge. He knew that it was stuffed with cold cash, and a lot of money, flashed about, would not go with his skimpy attire and would only provoke suspicion.

It was long after dark when he found himself seated on one of a long row of cots extending along both sides of a mile long building that Bugs decided to count his dough. Crawling under the blanket and holding it so that light seeped down under from the top end, he eased the wallet from his breeches pocket and began eagerly to explore its contents. At first there appeared to be nothing but money in the wallet. But that money totaled an even two hundred and fifty dollars. Bugs'

eyes came out a foot as he thumbed the bills. Then, stuffing them in his pocket, he went through the rest of the wallet. There were no cards, licenses, or anything like that. In fact, there was nothing else, and he was about to shove the wallet back into his pocket to be expertly disposed of the next day, when a small snapshot fell out of a section of the wallet he had somehow overlooked.

LEAVING the wallet under the covers he propped himself up and took a look at the snapshot in a better light. It was a picture of a pretty girl. Pretty? That was hardly the word to describe the lovely face that smiled up at Bugs.

"Boy!" he breathed, and held the picture up so that the light hit it more fully. "Boy, ain't she a honey?"

"Ain't she though! Where'd you swipe that, guy?"

Bugs spun around on his rear end and stared into the face of one Slim Burke who shared the next cot.

"Where do you get that stuff, *swipe*?" he grated.

Burke reached over and took the picture.

"I suppose she's your sweetie, huh?" he grunted sarcastically.

Bugs hesitated but the fraction of a second.

"What else?" he snapped. "Of course she's my girl."

Burke took another look at the picture and his lip curled.

"Nuts!" he said. "A dame with those clothes, and that face, fall for a mug like yours? Don't make me laugh!"

Bugs grabbed the picture away.

"And nuts to you, Burke," he growled. "That's my dame, and take it or leave it."

"I'll leave it," Burke said. "You probably don't even know her name."

At that moment Lady Luck smiled upon Bugs for the first time in a good many long, long hours. He had idly turned the

picture over. Written on the back were three little words, plus an initial:

All my love.

M.

"Don't know her name, huh?" he jeered and let Burke have a look. "See that? the M's for Mary. Mary Murphy, cluck!"

Burke took a look, gave a little shake of his head.

"For Pete's sake!" he breathed. "Okay, maybe she is your girl. But how the hell could a swell looking kid like that give any of her love to a guy with your face? It ain't right."

Bugs chuckled and settled back comfortably on his bunk to feast his eyes on Mary's smiling face.

"It ain't a guy's looks that count," he presently said with a knowing nod. "Its how you treat 'em."

"Nuts!" said Burke.

"Lights out, you guys!" roared the sergeant from the doorway.

With the coming of dawn, Bugs' firm decision to stop working for Uncle Sam was just as firm as ever. In fact, it was firmer, because there was two hundred and fifty bucks in his pockets that needed spending. However, with the coming of dawn, also, he began to learn his first military lesson. In short, that when you're once in the army, you're *in the army*. And so the days passed into weeks, and the weeks into months, and Bugs Haggardy remained in uniform.

Oddly enough, however, his desire to "go over the hill", as he learned the expression to be, rapidly diminished with the passing of time. Perhaps it was due to the pals he made, or the three squares a day at no cost for the first time in his life, or the things his money could buy when he went to town on pass. Probably, though, it was due to a new found interest; something he'd never seen before, and something which strangely intrigued him the very first moment he set eyes upon it. The Lewis Automatic machine-gun.

Guns had never played any part in Bugs' former life. In fact he had shied away from them with the inborn aversion of the true pickpocket. Yet, in the army, guns came under a different heading. And so, when K Company of the 15th U.S. Machine Gun Battalion arrived for final training at the base depot at Tremaine, France, Private Haggardy could not only take his gun apart and put it together faster than anybody else in the company, including the officers, but he could shoot the wings off a fly in flight at any reasonable distance. This brought him praise from officers and comrades alike. It was a pleasant experience that he had never known. And so, all in all, life grew a bit more durable to Bugs Haggardy, the former pickpocket.

As a matter of fact, he was actually admitting that almost brain-stunning truth one late afternoon, when the ungodly sound of half a dozen pianos falling down stairs suddenly shattered the comparative silence of the training depot. The sound had not even died away to the echo when the eerie wail of air raid sirens added to the din.

For a full second Bugs stood rooted in his tracks, then with a wild shout he broke into a mad dash toward his company barracks. Half way there he was flung flat on his face, as the earth seemed virtually to open up right under his feet. Scrambling to his knees he saw a Red Cross depot, on the far side of the camp, belch flame and smoke. Twisting his head he stared dully upward toward the east. Silhouetted against the sweeping shadows of night, six winged monsters were rushing through the air. It was the first time Bugs had ever seen a German Gotha, but he didn't need two guesses to identify the big crates.

Awe, fear, and a certain weird curiosity held him spellbound, his ears momentarily deaf to the sharp commands that began popping all around him. Then a

company sergeant rushed over and practically threw a machine gun into his hands.

"Blast away, dope!" the sergeant roared. "We gotta drive 'em off!"

Three Gothas had already laid their eggs and were zooming toward heaven. But the other three were in the act of nosing over and swooping down low towards the camp of Company K. Cursing, Bugs dropped to one knee, brought the machine gun to his shoulder and took a bead on the nose of the first bomber roaring down. He followed it down for a few seconds just to make sure of his bead, and then squeezed the trigger. The gun spat flame and sound, and bucked and kicked against his shoulder, but he held it steady as a rock, and poured out every one of the ninety-seven rounds in the drum. Only when the gun went silent did he release his pressure on the trigger. But as he did, he accompanied the movement with a dumb-founded gasp.

"My God, look!" he screamed. "I got it! It's on fire. It's going to hit the ground. I got it. Holy mackerel, look!"

HIS words, even had they been heard above the roar of the diving bombers, were wasted on the others, for everybody in the camp who had eyes was staring at the falling bomber. Bright red flames had enveloped the nose of the giant plane and were sweeping upward to engulf the rest of the craft. In no time it became nothing but some weird flaming inferno that plunged straight into the ground at the south side of the camp, and then fountained upward and outward to the four winds.

A moment later a flock of man-made American eagles came racing from out of nowhere and fell upon the other five Gothas that were still in the air. Two of the Gothas rolled over like wounded birds of a prehistoric era, and then fell to the ground in ruins. The remaining three bombers turned tail and went racing away

to the east with the flock of American combat ships tearing after them like flying pack-dogs after wounded bear.

"My God, that was, damned good machinegun shooting!" cried a voice behind the slightly stunned Bugs. "What's your name, soldier?"

Bugs turned to see a leathery faced officer walking toward him. The man wore a major's insignia, and a pair of Air Service wings over his upper left tunic pocket. Bugs lowered his empty machine-gun and saluted.

"Haggardy, sir," he said. "K Company. Then I really did get it, huh, sir?"

"And how you got it!" the other grinned. "I'm Major Trapp, of the Fourteen Observation Squadron. Where'd you learn to handle a machine-gun like that? Been in the trenches with some other outfit?"

"No sir," Bug beamed. "I just picked it up since I enlisted. It . . . well, these things sort of came natural to me. I guess I got a yen for them. Well, I'm top man in the Company when it comes to them, sir."

"I can believe that," the major nodded. "Haggardy of K Company, eh? Well, maybe I'll be seeing more of you, Haggardy. Congratulations, anyway."

"Thanks, sir," Bugs grinned.

The Air Service officer walked away, and then Bugs' pals came rushing up. And for the next hour he was *the* hero of all France as far as the members of the camp were concerned. And later, even the Battalion colonel and his staff came over to congratulate him. As a matter of fact Bugs remained a hero for the next three days. Then, on the fourth day, he was called into his company captain's tent.

"Well, Haggardy," the officer said, "looks like you've got a break. You've been drafted by the Air Service, and a corporal's chevrons and pay go along with it."

"Air Service?" Bugs gulped. "But . . .

I don't know how to fly, Captain. Hell, I mean, excuse me, sir, but I don't want to go up in no plane."

The company captain chuckled and shook his head.

"Don't worry, you won't," he said. "You've been drafted by the Fourteenth Observation Squadron to act as corporal in charge of the repair and maintenance of machine guns."

Bugs hesitated, torn between a corporal's chevron's and his pals in Company K.

"But this is a swell outfit, too, Captain," he said. "All my pals are here. And, well. . ."

"I know how it is," the other nodded. "And you're a credit to the Company, Haggardy. But I've got to be honest with you, much as I want you to stay, myself. It's a break, Haggardy. At Fourteen Squadron you'll be somebody. Here in Company K you're just a machine gunner—just another one of us stuck in a trench. I hate like hell to see you go, but frankly, I'd accept the transfer if I were you."

Bugs plucked at his lower lip a moment, then shrugged.

"Okay, sir," he said, "if that's the way you think it should be."

And so Corporal Bugs Haggardy joined the Fourteenth Observation Squadron to serve as a non-com in charge of machine guns. Not knowing what lay ahead of him, he reported to the company C. O.

"Said I might be seeing more of you, Haggardy," the C. O. had greeted him. "Well, I'm glad to have you in the outfit. Who knows, perhaps we'll eventually make an observer out of you. And that will mean the promotion to a commission, perhaps. It'll be up to you."

"Yes, sir," was all Bugs said.

"You'll find Captain Wynn of B Flight on the tarmac somewhere," the C.O. said. "Turn over your assignment and transfer

papers to him. You'll take your orders from Captain Wynn. Good luck, and give us a good job, Corporal. God knows we need a man who knows a Lewis gun. That's all."

Bugs saluted and retreated outside to the tarmac. A sergeant pointed out Captain Wynn by one of the D.H's. on the line, and Bugs went over.

"Corporal Haggardy reporting for duty, sir," he said, and nervously fished out his transfer papers from his tunic pocket.

His movement was too nervous, and as a result the entire contents of his pocket spilled down onto the rain-soaked ground. A little cry clogged in his throat as he saw the picture of his Mary flutter down into a little pool. Ignoring the transfer papers that had dropped into a larger puddle, he dived forward and down to Mary's rescue. Fortunately the picture had landed face up, and only the back was wet. He wiped it, stuck it in his pocket, and then rescued the transfer and assignment papers.

"Sorry, sir," he said, and handed them over.

Black eyes stared deep into his, and he had the feeling that he wasn't going to like Captain Wynn.

"Your girl, Corporal?" the officer asked, and nodded toward Bugs' tunic pocket.

Bugs grinned, and nodded back.

"Yes, sir," he said.

"A very pretty girl," the officer commented. "If you're as careless with the guns as you are with your girl's picture it won't go so well with you. Just keep it in mind, Corporal. What did you say your name was?"

"Haggardy, sir."

"Well, Haggardy, maybe you're going to like being attached to B Flight, and maybe you aren't. At least you've got off to a bad start with me. Now, go find the Flight Sergeant and have him give you a hutment bunk. Then get back here on the hop. There's work for you to do."

By the end of that day, Bugs regretted leaving K Company. True, a couple of the officers in K Company had been pretty hard guys, but compared to Captain Wynn they had really been just softies. The Flight Commander worked him ragged, and jumped on him with both feet at every turn. Nothing seemed to please the officer, and poor Bugs took it on the chin coming and going.

THE next day was no different, nor the next, nor the next. Oddly enough, or not so odd, he got along swell with the other pilots and observers in the flight, but to Captain Wynn he was just so much dirt under foot. A hundred times he was on the point of going to Major Trapp and requesting a transfer back to K Company, yet each time something inside of him squashed the idea. It was as though that was just the one thing the hard boiled Flight Commander wanted him to do . . . to go running for help like a dog with his tail between his legs. Haggardy, the pick-pocket, would have done it after the first blast. But Haggardy, the soldier, was a different man. No one was going to shove him off the end of the limb just because he didn't happen to like a guy.

But enough is enough for any man, and one day, about three weeks after Bugs' arrival at Fourteen, he tossed army training over the side and let fly in his own defense. The inevitable had come to a head as a result of Bugs not repairing a damaged feed lug on Captain Wynn's Vickers. The injustice of it all to Bugs was that he would have repaired the lug by the time the ship went up for patrol. And he told the Captain so, in no uncertain terms.

"No excuse, Haggardy!" the officer snapped. "You were simply loafing on the job. Supposing I'd taken that ship up, with Caldwell in the rear pit, on an emergency flight . . . and we'd run into Fokkers? Snap into it. You're certainly

heading for a lot of trouble around here."

And then Bugs blew up.

"I suppose I ain't in it right now, huh?" he shouted. "You been on my neck ever since I reported. What have you got against me, anyway? I don't please you about anything. The others think I do my job okay."

Black eyes filmed with contempt, and Wynn's voice was like ice.

"Perhaps it's because they like you, Haggardy. I don't. I think you're a loafer, and I think you're yellow. Yes, I said yellow. A nice ground job you have, when a man with your machine-gun ability should be in one of the rear pits as an observer."

Bugs bit his lip. Since coming to Fourteen he'd had more than one chance to take his first ride in a plane, but he'd turned them all down. Later, he had cursed himself for doing so, but when the next invite came, his guts strangely contracted again, and he refused again. There was just something about shooting through the skies that held him fast to the ground. Perhaps it was memory of seeing the flaming Gotha go hurtling down into hell. Anyway, it was something. But the captain's words stung. He thrust out his jaw.

"I ain't yellow," he said. "You got no right saying I am, just because you're my superior officer."

The cold smile made Bugs' heart stand still.

"But I am your superior officer, Haggardy," Captain Wynn said. "And I'm giving you an order right now. The rear gun on my ship here isn't working just right. I want it checked from the air on the ground targets. Here's my helmet and goggles. Get into the rear pit."

Bugs' knees almost buckled under him.

"But I don't care nothing about flying, Captain," he blurted.

Captain Wynn's eyes seemed to shoot sparks.

"You yellowbelly!" he snapped. "Your

kind are all alike. Get into that rear pit before I kick you into it. I'm giving you an order, and if you don't know what an order means in this man's army then you'll damn soon find out!"

Bugs Haggardy never hated a man so much in all his life, as he hated the cold-eyed Flight Commander at that moment. But that hatred fostered reckless courage. He strapped on the helmet and goggles.

"Okay, Captain," he said through clenched teeth. "I'll go up with you."

The other's eyes widened for a moment, then refrosted.

"Get in, then. Be sure that your safety belt is snapped tight when you stand up to fire. Get in."

Ten minutes later, as the engine's roar filled his ears, the ground fell away from Bugs, and the DH carried him soaring up toward Heaven. Both hands gripping the rims of the cockpit, he closed his eyes and waited for the hellish roar of what must be the inevitable. But nothing happened, and there crept through him the sensation that he was floating on a cloud. He opened his eyes, stared at the back of Captain Wynn's neck for a moment, then at the cloud-dotted air ahead of the whirling, shimmering propeller arc, and then down at the ground.

It was really five hundred feet below him, but it looked five hundred miles to Bugs, and for a wild moment stark terror gripped him. It passed, however, and, except when Captain Wynn slammed the ship over in a steep bank, he almost began to get a kick out of it all. Then suddenly a cloud or something fell down on his head. He ducked, and looked cautiously upward. It wasn't a cloud, but Captain Wynn's hand. The pilot had reached back and rapped him one to get his attention. Then the roar of the engine died off some, and he heard Wynn's voice.

"Look down to the right!" the man shouted. "See those squares with black centers?"

Bugs peeped over the side, while his stomach played tricks. He made out three large white squares on the ground over by the north side of the field. They had black centers. Pulling in his head he looked at Captain Wynn, and nodded.

"Those are the targets!" came the words. "I'm going to fly on and then turn back and go past them. Empty the gun as we go by, but watch the way the drum turns. It's too jerky. Got your belt fastened? Okay, get set."

BUGS had to try five times before he could force himself to stand up in the frail cockpit. He was sure that his weight would carry him right down through the thin floorboards, and, just in case, he hung onto the spade grip of the Scarff-mounted Lewis gun for dear life. He didn't go crashing on down through, however, and presently a sense of comparative safety returned. Checking the gun, he swung the mounting around and poked the muzzle toward the ground and squinted through the ring sight. A few moments later the first target came into deflection vision, and he squeezed the trigger. Fifty rounds hammered out of the gun and then the drum stuck.

He ripped off the drum and saw that the jack-lug was loose, and wobbled on its locking pin instead of being steady. A couple of twists fixed that, and then he took a new full drum out of the cockpit rack and put it on the gun. Then he reached forward and tapped Captain Wynn on the shoulder.

"It's okay, now!" he shouted. "Go by once more."

The other turned.

"You're sure?" he shouted.

"Positive!" Bugs nodded.

"Then sit down and enjoy yourself," the Flight Commander said and turned front.

Bugs scowled, and felt a clammy creepiness at the back of his neck. There wasn't

anything else to do, however, so locking the gun so it wouldn't bang and swing around in the wind, he sat down on the observer's stool and stared helplessly out over cloud filled skies. Presently he glanced downward, and gasped. The brownish ground was covered with crazy zigzag marks. Crazy, perhaps, but there wasn't anything crazy about them to Bugs. He'd seen plenty of air photos back at the squadron and realized instantly that Wynn was guiding the DH over the trenches. Cold as the upper air was, sweat formed on his brow to be instantly whipped off by the propeller blast. Then the goggles Wynn had given him fogged up, and both ground and sky became one great conglomerate blur.

In desperation he ripped off the goggles, gasped with relief as everything appeared to be just as it was before his goggles fogged up. But, it wasn't. That is, it wasn't a moment later. A roar off to the left almost drowned out the howl of the Liberty in the nose. Bugs jerked his head around and almost passed out cold as three oily black gobs of smoke suddenly appeared out of nowhere. From where he sat he was sure that they were right at the wingtips, and he expected in the next second to see the DH go curving away from them. Instead, though, the plane held its course, and more roars and more oily black gobs of smoke came into Bugs Haggardy's life, just off the end of his nose.

And then, without warning, he was almost flung bodily from the ship. In fact, had he not followed Captain Wynn's strict orders and fastened his safety belt he probably would have been tossed out. As it was, he was slammed up against the side of the cockpit with such force that the air in his lungs made a whistling sound as it rushed through his clenched teeth. Then, in the next moment, he felt Captain Wynn's hand rap him on the head. The pilot was pointing up and off to the right.

"Get at that gun, Haggardy!" came the bellow. "Company coming. Didn't think there would be any around. Get at that gun! When I swing broadside, let him have it!"

Dumbly Bugs stared upward and to the right. Then he stopped being dumb. A black shadow was racing down out of the clouds. When it came into the sunshine it ceased to be a shadow. It became a plane, a German Fokker, with the Iron Cross insignia on the wings and on both sides of the fuselage. But what was very much more important to Bugs' state of mind was that its blunt nose was spitting out twin streams of jetting flame, and with it a noise that no machine gunner could possibly mistake.

Bugs saw it, and then he didn't see it for Captain Wynn suddenly practically turned the DH inside out, and Bugs went down onto the cockpit floor on his ear. When he finally regained his feet again the Fokker was not out there up to the right.

"The other side, you damn fool!" he heard Wynn's bellow. "Swing that gun around!"

Cursing and mumbling in his teeth, Bugs swung his gun to the left side of the pit, saw the Fokker zooming up from below and slightly behind, and tilted the Lewis' nose. His finger curled about the trigger and tightened; the Lewis started to spit flame and sound. Peering down through the ring sight he saw the Fokker suddenly swerve off to the left, cartwheel through a fast loop and go prop-clawing into the safety of some clouds. Then he stopped shooting and hung onto the gun for dear life as Captain Wynn banked and started down in a long power dive in the opposite direction. A moment later the pilot turned in the seat, dragged down the corners of his mouth, and arched his brows as he looked at Bugs.

"He didn't like that burst!" Wynn shouted. "You must have come close. Am

I surprised!" Then he turned around again.

Fifteen minutes later, or perhaps it was fifteen years, Bugs climbed out of the DH and down onto the solid ground that was the tarmac of Fourteen Squadron.

"You fixed the gun all right?" Wynn asked, taking his helmet and goggles.

"Sure, sir," Bugs nodded and then frowned. "Didn't you see me bang away at that Fokker?"

Wynn stared at him out of his black eyes.

"What Fokker?" he asked. "You better go have a drink, Corporal. Those knees of yours don't look any too stiff. After that, dismantle both guns and give them a good cleaning and checking."

With a nod the Flight Commander walked away, leaving Bugs standing bow-legged and flabber-gasted. Then a chuckle snapped him out of his trance. He turned to see one of the mechanics grinning at him.

"Scared hell out of you, eh?" the mechanic grinned. "Boy, the Skipper's hell on wheels when he doesn't like a guy. And if you ask me, Corporal, the Skipper don't like you, not even a little bit. That's funny, too, because he's one swell guy."

"Yeah!" Bugs snarled, and climbed wearily up to begin the laborious task of dismantling the guns. "Well, to me he ain't. He's a louse from way back. And he ain't going to pick on me for long either. I didn't ask to be put in his Flight."

"And I didn't ask to be a soldier," the other laughed. "But I'm here ain't I? Sure, if you want anything in this war, just ask for it. Yeah, just ask for it!"

Bugs glared down at the man.

"Meaning you're asking for a push in the mush?" he grated.

Some of the mirth went out of the other's face. He waved his hand and moved off.

"Okay, Corp, okay," he said. "I was

only suggesting, that's all. But he's still a swell guy, as far as I'm concerned."

BUGS gave up trying to figure it out. And as a matter of precaution he studiously avoided the Flight Commander whenever possible during the next few days. Oddly enough, though, the number of dirty jobs handed to him by Wynn's order decreased to a point where there weren't any more than his ordinary share. And the Flight Commander, himself, stopped hunting him out to fry him to a crisp for some minor mistake that could just as easily be overlooked. In fact, Bugs' association with everybody in Fourteen became normal. And the more he realized that, the more puzzled he became. Eventually, though, he believed his groping brain had found the correct answer. And believing that it *was* the correct answer filled him with a certain sense of pride.

"Sure," he nodded at his reflection in the hutment mirror one morning while B Flight was out on patrol. "I'm a dope not to have figured it before. In this man's war, you've got to deliver to prove anything. And that's what I done. Wynn was just putting me through the hoops to see if I had the guts to stay in this outfit. Probably on Major Trapp's orders, I'll bet. And when I showed I could take it, like I done when I stood up there and whanged at that Fokker, Trapp probably give him the okay to lay off'n me. Sure, am I a dope not to have fig. . ."

He never finished the last. The roar of planes cut off the word in the middle. Instantly he knew that it was B Flight coming back. Spinning, he dashed outside and rushed over to the tarmac, his eyes searching anxiously toward the east. Because of the position of the sun it was impossible to see the planes at first. But when he did pick them out against the shimmering blue, and saw that there were only five, the familiar rotten feeling hit him in the guts again.

"Harper's missing!" someone shouted.

"Naw," someone else corrected him. "There's Harper's crate to the right. It's Lieutenants Smith and Baxter. Tough! They were good guys, too."

A silence settled over the tense group on the tarmac as the formation broke up and the ships came coasting in one by one. By the time all had landed it was a certainty that the missing ship was that of Pilot Smith and Observer Baxter. And when he, himself, made certain that it wasn't Captain Wynn, and his observer, Lieutenant Caldwell, an odd sense of relief flooded through Bugs. The good feeling died a moment later, when Wynn taxied his bullet riddled plane up to the line and climbed out.

"Some one get the Medico!" the Flight Commander barked. "Caldwell's been hit, bad. Give me a hand, a couple of you."

Bugs and somebody else leaped forward and helped Wynn to lower the unconscious and badly wounded observer to the ground. By that time the squadron medico had arrived on the run. He knelt down beside the wounded man, then leaned closer. Presently he straightened up and shook his head.

"Too late," he said to Wynn. "Bled to death internally. Ran into hell, eh?"

The Flight Commander's face whitened about the eyes and mouth. Bugs saw that his fists were clenched rock hard.

"Twenty of them jumped us," Wynn said through stiff lips. "We had to scrap all the way back. Caldwell and Smith . . . couldn't make it. I think I got one of them. Balloons can tell us later. You'll . . . you'll do what's necessary, Doc? I'll go through his kit."

The Medico nodded, pressed Wynn's arm, and said nothing. The Flight Commander looked down just once at the still face of his observer, then turned on his heel and walked stiffly toward the squadron office. At the medico's bidding, a couple of the mechanics gently lifted the

dead man and carried him over toward the hospital shack. Bugs Haggardy wasn't one who volunteered. He couldn't. It was the first time that death had struck that close in his life, and it made his head swim, and his stomach sick. Finally, he crawled into his hutment and flung himself on his cot.

Coward? Far from it! There was never a soldier in war who has not at some time or another suffered the same spell of death sickness. But with them it passed in time, and so did it pass with Bugs. At the end of an hour he came back out onto the tarmac to find that hangar rumors were flying from mouth to mouth at the rate of a dozen a minute. Boiled down, the main rumor was that the Big Push, long expected and long awaited, was about to become a reality. According to the rumor, victory for the Americans would practically assure New Yorkers the pleasure of seeing the Kaiser crawl up Broadway barefooted, and the seat of his pants missing, within two months. At any rate it was sure to be quite a scrap, and an American victory would mean plenty.

As the day progressed, the rumors were confirmed and denied over and over again. However, it was plainly evident to all that something of importance was in the wind, for all patrols were cancelled, and the entire day was spent in putting every available plane in the pink of condition. Up to his ears with work on checking the guns, Bugs hardly had time to stick his nose outside the gunnery hut until long after dark. And then when he was on his way over to the mess, a squadron orderly button-holed him.

"You're wanted at the squadron office, Corp," the man announced. "The Major sent me for you. Better hop it quick. He don't like to be kept waiting."

Bugs cast a longing eye toward the non-coms' mess, then sighed and shuffled over to the squadron office. Major Trapp waved him to a chair.

"Sit down, Corporal. I've got something mighty unusual to talk over with you. You know that Lieutenant Caldwell was killed today?"

"Yes, sir," Bugs nodded. "I helped get him out of the ship."

The C. O. tapped his finger tips on the desk and stared at them. Then suddenly he raised his eyes to Bugs' face.

"What may be the most important drive in the war begins at dawn, Corporal," the C. O. said. "Everything that's got wings on it will be needed out there tomorrow. But for the type of work Fourteen will be assigned to do, a pilot without an observer will be out of luck. And it so happens that there isn't a single observer left at the pool. Every one has been drafted to some squadron or other. Haggardy, how about going along as Captain Wynn's observer?"

Bugs gulped and struggled to get his tongue untangled from his back teeth. He went hot and cold all over, but mostly cold.

"Captain Wynn's observer?" he finally echoed weakly. "You mean. . . ?"

"Just what I do mean, Haggardy. You don't know a damn thing about observation work, but Wynn can take care of that end. But you do know how to work a machine-gun, and that's what's going to be needed most tomorrow. Well, Haggardy? I can't order you over, of course."

"Well, sir," Bugs began and stumbled. Then in a rush of words, "What does Captain Wynn think of the idea? Maybe he won't want me along. He—he hates my guts. Or he did, anyway. I mean, unless he was riding me on your orders."

"Riding you on my orders?" the other blinked. "What the hell are you talking about? Taking you as his observer happens to be Captain Wynn's own suggestion. You satisfied him you could shoot from the pit of a plane the other day. Riding you? What do you mean riding you? Captain Wynn isn't that type."

Bugs groped for words, and wished to hell the C. O. would look someplace else for a couple of minutes. But the C. O. didn't, so Bugs shrugged.

"Maybe I just guessed so," he said. Then sucking in breath, "All right . . . all right, sir, I'll take a crack at it, if there's nobody else to go instead."

"There isn't," the C. O. shook his head, and then smiled. "Good lad, Haggardy. Didn't I say that maybe we'd make an observer out of you?"

"Yeah, sir," Bugs mumbled as the room began to go around. "That's just what you said, wasn't it. I—er, that is, I ain't eaten yet, sir. Could I . . . ?"

"Chase along," the C. O. chuckled. "Be on the tarmac at four in the morning. The entire squadron takes off at six. Captain Wynn will give you all the instructions you need. Good luck, Haggardy."

WHEN he was three paces from the outside of the squadron office door, Haggardy was seized with the violent desire to whirl back in and retract his words to the C. O. But he didn't. He just stood there for several long seconds, battling with his fears and his courage. And then finally he dragged himself over to the non-com's mess, shoved food down his dry throat, and then staggered into his hutment and flung himself under the blankets of his cot.

In the darkness as he lay there with eyes wide open, he saw pictures of Lieutenant Coldwell. Pictures of his bloodless face, his limp hands, and his blood-stained flying suit. Pictures, pictures, pictures. He dreamed fitfully of sudden death, and of sky warriors riding down to the grave in flaming ships.

Finally he woke up. He found himself lying in a heap on the floor all tangled up, in his blankets. Captain Wynn's batman was striving to untangle him and drag him free, puffing and cursing as he tugged and yanked.

"My gawd, Corp, wake up! It's four ten. What in hell was you dreaming about? A free for all? You damn near socked me on the button. Come on, snap out of it!"

The cold grey light of dawn that was seeping in through the hutment window went straight to Bugs' heart and chilled it to the core. Numbly he crawled up and sank down on the edge of his bunk, momentarily oblivious to the Captain's batman. This was tomorrow. This was the day when he would go over the lines. This was the day when maybe . . . maybe . . .

"Hey, Corp, will you get out of here? All the others are on the tarmac. My gawd, this man's army is sure going to hell when I have to go around waking up a nursemaid to a machine gun. Listen, Corp, your pants is going to be kicked right up out between your teeth if you don't get out there in a hurry. The Skipper didn't say please when he sent me in here."

"Aw go fry a duck!" Bugs snarled, and began to pull on his clothes. "We don't take off until six, see?"

Saying that "we" aloud suddenly kicked a thrill through him. He grinned almost happily, and pulled on his shirt. But a few minutes later when he went out into the cold grey dawn, and over to where the seventeen planes were being warmed up, a familiar dryness got him by the throat, and he felt worse than ever. He tried to hide it from showing on his face, and went over to Captain Wynn and reported. The Flight Commander gave him a long steady look, then almost smiled.

"I was almost beginning to think that I'd made another mistake, Haggardy," he said. "That you weren't going to go through with it. But it seems I'm wrong again. Now, listen carefully. First, better have a cigarette. They'll be around with coffee and cognac before we take off."

The captain paused long enough while they both lighted up.

"Our job will be mostly ground strafing, Haggardy," the officer began presently. "Artillery has been banging away all night and the first wave will go over at six-thirty—just about the time we hit the lines. Never mind what goes on down on the ground. I mean, don't try to spot things to report when we come back for more gas and Cooper bombs. I'll take care of that. You just work the rear gun for dear life, and slam bang away at everything wearing a German uniform. Got that all straight?"

"Yes, sir," Bugs nodded. "I guess I have. But—but what if the Fokkers *do* come down on us?"

For a moment Captain Wynn said nothing. He let his eyes wander over Bugs' face. Then he spoke quietly.

"Then we'll shoot like hell in both directions. Up and down. And I'll expect my observer to fight just as hard as I do. I think he will."

A warm tingle rippled through Bugs, and he almost liked the hard boiled captain for a moment.

"Thanks, sir," he mumbled.

"Forget it, Haggardy," the other said. "But, by the way, when this business is over I want to have a little talk with you. Ah, here's the coffee and cognac. Go easy on the cognac part, Haggardy. It might up and smack you when we start tossing ourselves around the sky. Well, good luck to—both of us."

At one minute before six o'clock the seventeen planes of Fourteen Squadron rolled out onto the field and took off in a huge V formation. Sunk low in the pit to protect himself as much as possible from the cold blasts the whirling prop slammed back, Bugs hugged his knees and tried desperately to keep his heart from popping up into his mouth. From the neck down he felt like a dead man; a dead man roasting in the flames of hell because he couldn't seem to move a muscle.

For hours it seemed he sat there virtually paralyzed. All of him but his brain. Through it raced every event of his life. Every event and every misdeed he had committed. Deliberately he stacked them against all the good deeds he had done, and found not even the ghost of a chance for comparison. He shivered and somehow managed to pry one hand loose from the other to wipe cold sweat from his face. If this was to be his judgment day, he'd certainly be shoveling coal before nightfall.

SUDDENLY, a violent rocking of the plane caused him to cut off his thoughts and poke his head up above the rim level of the pit. Captain Wynn couldn't reach him with his hand and had waggled the wings to attract his attention. The officer pointed with his free hand toward the ground. Bugs glanced back first, saw that the rest of the formation was slowly spreading out into a single line. Then he looked downward. A brown-green blur was all he saw at first. Then things began to take shape and form. He saw the series of zigzag lines and knew that they were the trenches. Beyond the trenches he saw a strip of smoking flame belching hell, and knew that that area must be No Man's Land. And beyond the strip of hell, farther east, was another series of zigzag lines that were the German trenches.

At that moment the D. H's. engine peetered out and the nose dipped downward. Bugs grabbed for the rim of the cockpit and almost dug his fingernails through the leather covering. Wild-eyed he turned toward Captain Wynn. The pilot had a hand cupped to his mouth and was nodding his head in the general direction of the German trenches to the east of them.

"I'm going to dive!" came the words to Bugs. "Get your gun ready, and then start shooting as soon as I level off. Shoot

off the left side, and aim for the men in the trenches. Watch that you don't swing the gun and clip our tail when I zoom. Okay! Here we go!"

In the nick of time Bugs was able to swing the Lewis around into firing position to the left, and brace himself. The D. H.'s nose dropped down to the vertical and Bugs went tearing down toward the ground, the very force of the dive almost driving the air down into his lungs.

Then suddenly he realized that Wynn was firing his guns. The nose of the D.H. was spewing out jetting flame, and winking tracers were curving down into grey-clad figures that huddled against shell blasted walls of smoking dirt. Tearing his eyes from the sight below, Bugs looked straight out and saw that every ship of Fourteen was coming down in a gun-crackling dive. And then a mighty force almost pushed his hips up alongside his lungs. The D.H. had pulled out of its dive and was leveling off so that Bugs could blast a broadside down into the trenches.

For a moment it seemed that all hell could not make him move a muscle. He stood crouched over his Lewis, eyes fixed in rigid fascination at the huddled men below and the belching hell that fountained up all around them. Men! Live men who would crumple like seared grass under the hail of death that would pour out from his Lewis when he pulled the trigger. Men, who. . .

The last exploded in thin air. At that moment spurts of flame leaped up from those clusters of men in those trenches, and in a weird sort of way Bugs realized that those spurts of flame were so many certain deaths groping upward to snuff him out of the world and the war forever.

"The hell you will!" he bellowed, and pressed the trigger of the Lewis.

He saw his own tracers slice down on top of the German soldiers; saw them fall over to land in grotesque positions, or sink

into the ground. When his gun went silent he ripped off the empty drum, flung it away from him, and slammed a full drum on the post in its place. And then lined up the trench in his sights and pulled the trigger again to hold it all the way back until that drum, too, was empty.

Then suddenly the gun was torn from his grasp. The barrel swung crazily toward the tail of the ship, and the spade grip came within a split hair of smacking his chin off. Catching himself as he went flying off balance he grabbed the gun and hung on as the D.H. went zooming upward. At the peak of the zoom, he reloaded, had just time enough to acknowledge Captain Wynn's grin, and then down he went again.

Four times the Flight Commander thundered down on the trenches. But as the D.H. was about to start down on its fifth strafing dive, a strange new crackling sound came to Bugs' ears. Wildly he glanced about the air, then sucked in his breath as he saw the blunt-nosed, fire-spitting Fokker tearing straight down from above. Instinct made him turn to rap Captain Wynn on the shoulder to get his attention. But that was unnecessary. The pilot had already spotted the oncoming enemy ship, and was furiously jerking the Cooper bomb release toggles in his pit to get rid of all possible weight. Then he turned just as Bugs' hand hit his shoulder.

"Blaze away!" Wynn roared. "Give him everything you can. We'll get him!"

They were words spoken too soon, however. Rather, spoken with too much confidence. Bugs wheeled, and tried to bring his sights to bear on the diving plane, but even as he swung the gun around, the D. H. lurched drunkenly to the side, and the Fokker seemed to disappear. Bracing himself Bugs looked forward, and gasped aloud. Captain Wynn was slumped over in the seat, and the top of his right shoulder was slowly turning red.

"Captain! Captain Wynn! For God's

sake! You've hit! Is it bad, Captain Wynn?"

THE pilot stirred, slowly sat up, and the plane staggered back onto an even keel. Twisting back, Bugs searched the heavens for the Hun, saw him, and began firing blindly. Perhaps he would have got his first plane, had not the D.H. gone lurching crazily up on one wing again. He knew that his tracers were smacking right into the Fokker, and where his visible tracers were going, his invisible bullets were following. But he didn't have the chance to see what happened next as regards the Fokker. The D.H. had fallen off on one wing and was losing altitude like an express elevator out of control.

Letting go of his gun, Bugs leaned way over the strip of fuselage that separated the two pits, grabbed Captain Wynn by the head and shook hard.

"Hang on, Captain!" he bellowed. "Hang on. We're going down fast. My God, you've got to snap out of it. Hey!"

Once again the pilot stirred himself enough to get up to a sitting position. Then, little by little, the plane stopped spinning and the nose began to come up. It was almost up to an even keel when the wounded captain's strength ran out for the second time. Bugs saw him sway forward and gropingly reach out his hand. A moment later the roar of the engine died out, and the prop became dead still, straight across the nose of the plane.

Bugs groaned, then shouted aloud and flung up both arms and buried his head in them as the ground came rushing up toward him. In the next moment sky and earth exploded in one terrific roar of sound. Giant hands smashed Bugs down into the floorboards of the pit, then hoisted him up and flung him out. Balls of flashing colored light danced and spun along with him. Then suddenly they all winked out, and he went tumbling down into a great black hole without any bottom to it.

WHEN he again opened his eyes it was almost night. Dark shadows hovered all about him, and off to his left, there was a dull red ball of fire sinking beyond the lip of the world. He was lying on his side on a bed of mud, and there seemed to be no sense of feeling in any part of his body. For several minutes he lay motionless, and then, as though some hidden spring had been released within him, he felt the blood flowing through his veins, and life returning to his body. He started to sit up, moaned with pain and fell on his back. A sledge hammer was smashing in the top of his skull, going deeper into his brain with every blow.

Inch by inch he turned over to see that he was on his other side. Through a thin red film he saw the D.H., crumpled into a heap of matchwood and torn fabric. Then as the thin film faded away, he saw the still form of Captain Wynn sagging down

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out of the wreck. Even as he saw the man, the pilot's eyes fluttered open, seemed to look into his for a moment, and then fluttered shut. The captain was hanging more or less head down, and blood was dripping from the top of his soggy helmet.

Clenching his teeth against the giddiness that any movement caused, Bugs forced himself up on his hands and knees, and crawled through the mud to the plane. Wynn's legs were caught under the smashed instrument board. The right leg was twisted back under the body in a grotesque position. Fighting to get breath into his aching lungs, Bugs forced himself up, got his shoulder under a broken fuselage longeron, and heaved upward. The heave carried the instrument board upward, and the unconscious form of Captain Wynn fell out onto the muddy ground. Squirming out from under, Bugs caught the Captain under the armpits and slowly dragged him away from the wreck to a spot of comparatively dry ground. Pain pried open the man's eyes, and as he recognized Bugs his whitish lips twitched.

"Thanks, Haggardy," he whispered. "Matches in my tunic pocket. Touch off the plane. I think we're in No Man's Land someplace. It may bring shell fire, but we've got to risk it, and—and hope an infantry patrol will come out—and get us."

The Captain sighed and closed his eyes. Bugs fumbled for the matches, found them and crawled back to the plane. A moment later a piece of torn fabric caught fire from

the match. The flames ate the ship as if it were so much dry wheat. By the time Bugs had crawled wearily back to the unconscious Captain, the entire wreck was a mass of flame that shot high into the air above them.

Then suddenly there came to Bugs a sort of hollow whine, from off to his right. Then another, and another. And then the first two shells from the German guns arced down into the earth not fifty yards away and filled the air with a thundering roar. An invisible force hurled Bugs over backward, and weakly he strived to push himself up. But he was only slammed down again. And then, presently, his strength ran to the end of its string and he passed out cold.

THE next thing he realized he was under the warm blankets of a hospital cot. A few miles of bandage covered the top of his head, and a couple of places on his body. But apart from a dull ache in his brain he didn't feel badly. Contented, he just lay there blinking up at a white-washed ceiling.

"How do you feel, Haggardy?"

Bugs slowly turned his head to see Captain Wynn in the cot next to his. The Flight Commander's right leg was strung up in a hammock cast, and miles of bandages were on him, too. But he grinned cheerfully as Bugs looked his way.

"Okay, sir, I guess," Bugs said. "I ain't been awake long enough to know exactly. Where are we?"

"In the officers' ward at Base," Wynn said. "I insisted that you be put in here with me, because if you don't get an observer's commission when you're mended, then I'm a liar. Fact is, I've already put through the recommendation."

"That's swell, sir," Bugs grinned. "I guess maybe I could get to like the observing end—in time. And a commission would be something, what I mean!"

"No more than you deserve, Hag-

gardy," Captain Wynn said. "And I'm particularly glad that I could put through the recommendation. Do you know what day this is, Haggardy? The twenty-first of April. That mean anything to you?"

Bugs frowned, gave it up, and shook his head faintly.

"Can't say that it does, Captain," he grunted.

"It does to me," the other said. "Just a year ago today three very important things happened in my life. The dearest girl in the world accepted my proposal of marriage, and I received my commission in the Air Service."

"What's the other one?" asked Bugs when Wynn didn't continue.

The officer grinned for a moment, reminiscently.

"That was the day you picked my pocket, Haggardy," he said.

Bugs almost fell out of bed. He stared at the Flight Commander, popeyed.

"Holy smoke!" he breathed. "Then—I mean, when I dropped that picture of your girl. . . . Say, you've known it ever since I hit Fourteen?"

"Since the moment I first laid eyes on you," Captain Wynn nodded. "I've got a good memory for faces, no fooling. I saw you duck into the recruiting office that day, Haggardy, and decided to let you go. But when you turned up at Fourteen. . .

That's what I mentioned just before we took off yesterday. Rather, what I meant when I said I wanted to talk with you when we came back. It was to apologize, Haggardy for the dirty deal I handed you. But when I recognized you, and was certain after seeing the picture, I wanted nothing better than to ride you to a fare-thee-well; to make you roast for clipping me for that two fifty. I knew you weren't in the army of your own accord. To me, you were just a dirty little sneak thief. But . . . I found out I was wrong, Haggardy. Maybe war does things to people. Anyway, you proved yourself to be a real man. Now, I want to apologize for the cheap way I acted. Will you accept the apology?"

A warm glow was stealing through Bugs' body. He grinned so hard his face hurt.

"Hell! Sure, Captain," he said. "I guess I'd done the same thing if I been in your shoes. Two fifty is a lot of change for any guy to lose on the day his dame says, 'Yes.' Guess you were on your way to meet her then, huh? Say, tell me. What's her name?"

"It's Mary. Mary Murphy."

Bugs gasped, then lay back limp.

"Holy jumping catfish!" he breathed.

"I must be a physic, or whatever it is they call them guys that read minds."

THE END

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Feb.-March Issue

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Conducted by Nosedive Ginsburg

COME in and sit down in the mud, dear comrades, and you may be sure that nothing brightens the boyish heart of Ginsburg so much as a gathering of the sky lice. But this is a busy day, my bouncing little bums, and Ginsburg has not the time or the patience to be amusing in his usual way, and shall therefore let the mad but merry members speak for themselves. By their deeds ye shall know them, and such a bundle of tripe has never before desecrated these justly famous pages.

First to speak, in his bold and arrogant way, is that everlasting scourge of the world of letters, the one and only, the original and perennial Mad Mudhen of New Orleans, and C. O. of the Aeronca Aces, Charlie Piedra. As all of you know, Charlie has been chased out of New Orleans by an enraged citizenry and now makes his home at Box 33, Valdosta, Ga., and I can well imagine how an insignificant little squirt like Charlie can be at home and quite comfortable within the modest confines of a Post Office Box. Says Charlie:

Hey, Ginsburg!

Lascivious—that's a fine word to use on me after all these years! I don't know what it means, but knowing you as I do, it probably isn't anything complimentary.

Being one of those artists who find inspiration in adversity, however, I have just completed a truly magnificent ode (you don't mean odor, do you, Charlie) to that winged immortal, the

FOKKER!

There's something about a Fokker
That thrills me to my toes;
It's sudden death, from its tail
To its coffin-shaped nose!

In grisly, gaudy Fokkers,
Richthofen and Boelke flew—
Spreading Death, making history,
Among the knights of the blue.

Just to look at one is a thrill
When I see a Fokker on these pages—
What? Yes, Boeing, Gruman, Severson—
Nuts! Only Fokker will live through the ages!

Anyway, how do you like that poem? For once, with such a splendid subject to work on, I deeply regret that I am not a better poet. (Me, too, Charlie; I wish you were a better poet!) Well, I can at least find solace in the thought that I am a better poet than you were a parachute jumper. (Rip off his ears, Louie; rip off his ears!)

I leave you properly chastised for using "lascivious" on me, and here's a parting thought; how about my dollar for "The Haunted Hangar?" (Stop howling, you bandit, you; Ginsburg always pays off!)

Lasciviously yours,
Charlie.

Well, Charlie, I am glad to see you so happy with the word, "lascivious." Personally, I think it's an ugly word, although not so ugly as your poetry. Occasionally, when the mood is upon him, or maybe when the flies are upon him, Ginsburg is given to verse. This is for you Charlie:

ODE TO AN ODOR

There was a young man from Valdosta,
One exceeding wide in the mouth;
He thought himself Byrd and Acosta—
An aerial prince of the South.

In his brain there sparked a magneto,
That produced some horrible verse;
So we give you this flying mosquito,
And no other gift could be worse!

All right, Charlie; that stinks, too. But as we have said, we are very busy, and Ginsburg is a warrior; he is not a poet. To you Charlie, because we have nothing better to do with our money, we award a buck. If you think you are undeserving, pal, you need only to listen to the prattling pigeons who are yet to perform.

For example, since bad poetry is in order, we offer the already punch-drunk public the work of Member Ray Batelli who likes to be known by the tender title of "Death Ray" Batelli. Just to make matters more critical, Member Batelli is also an Aeronca Ace, serving faithfully in the Legions of Piedra, and subject at any moment to extermination by Louie, the Lush. Here is that Broken-Strut Batelli:

Listen Chump:

Don't get the idea in that one cylinder brain of yours that you can ignore me or the Aeronca Aces, because you can't! When the next issue of that cheap rag you print comes out, I expect to find myself the sole owner of another brand new one dollar bill. You may be the mighty Ginsburg to some guys, but to me you are just a bum. And not a very good one at that. Enough of this dilly-dallying around, however, and here's some more food for your fertile brain.

THE MIGHTY GINSBURG

By Ray Batelli

When Death stood before him
And beckoned him off
To that faraway shore,

He merely replied, "You can go to hell,"
As he flew on in the dawn.

(This is Ginsburg speaking again, ladies and gentlemen, and above you have just read The Mighty Ginsburg, by Ray Batelli. That is a sample of our poetry. It doesn't even rhyme! And if you don't think that's bad, just listen to what is to follow!)

A BOMBER

By Ray Batelli

When all the town is fast asleep,
And through the darkened skies
A bomber flies, quite fast and still,
It is time to be aware.

Death sits in the pilot's pit,
And Death sits in the rear,
The bombs fall on rich and poor;
They fall on young and old.

That's all for this time, bum. So until
next time, I remain your old pal,

Death Ray Batelli.

Let me thank you for stopping when you did, Raymond. Another stanza of verse and I would have bailed out without my chute. But all this should impress the clients with how simple a matter it is to fleece Ginsburg of a dollar, inasmuch as old pal Death Ray is about to be awarded one buck of the purest green.

Screwballs perfectly unbelievable have sneaked into this meeting, my pretty pigeons, and as I said, the entertainment is to be composed entirely by the members. Therefore, if you can possibly stand

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February Issue



and His
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it, we are about to present a bright communication from Member William Firtch, Jr., of 311 Deshler Avenue, Columbus, Ohio. Member William goes like this:

Dear Nosedive:

Don't mind the spots on the paper. That is just where I threw mud to make it look natural. To judge by the things you print in your column, I suppose that wind storms are the only kind of storms with which you are familiar. Just to be different, I'm going to spin a yarn about a rain storm, which is probably all wet.

I was cruising along the other day when it suddenly started to rain. Out of a clear sky, at that. It rained harder and harder until I couldn't see out of the cabin. What to do? I suddenly bethought me of some snakes I had on board. I just scooted those reptiles out there for windshield vipers. (Do you get it, members; do you get it?). They worked swell for a while, but it rained so hard they all sprained their backs trying to keep the windshield clear.

Now, snakes with broken backs, are no good as windshield vipers (no insinuation on your relatives, Ginsburg), and, as the ship was insured, I decided to jump before I got into an argument with some of the mount-tains thereabouts. I let 'er rip! Great Governor!! The chute almost failed to open because of the downpour. The rain was so thick that I practically had to swim down. If I had had fins (I could still use about five nice green ones), I would have had a much easier time getting down. But I am still alive to tell the tale and that is the main thing. Well, I'm pretty well worn out by the effort required by this masterpiece, so I guess I'll take off.

So long till Aeroncas wear zipper trousers,

William Firtch, Jr.
(Buffalo Billy The Kid)

BUFFALO BILLY, to these weary eyes, appears to be a liar of great promise, although, to be fair, not quite ready for the mad pace set by Member Hophead Madison of Rockford, Illinois. Nevertheless, William has done moderately well and is welcome to one of the dollars we kick so very freely about the hangar.

To keep the note of insanity up to standard, we offer you next the literary writhings of two wild Texas steers, Members Robert Van and Martin Breeding, whose

communication is from 1814 Fourth Avenue, Dallas, Texas. It must be explained that the letter was fashioned by the hand of Robert Van, and Mr. Breeding is only guilty of the diagram that accompanied the letter. However, inasmuch as the drawing was not suitable for reproduction, we are able to reproduce in these columns only the letter. You gentle sky geese will be good enough to hang on, and here goes:



Hi, Propwinder:

I shan't shovel insults at you, you lousy groundhog, but will make this short and sweet. (It doesn't appear to be very sweet, gentlemen, but pray, continue!) A pal, Martin Breeding and I, have an invention which will bring us millions, or at least a five spot from you, and two one-way tickets to the slaphatch for our trouble and ignorance. If you don't print this, you can expect a sock on the prop-boss or a kick in the empennage, or, still worse, another letter with a still lousier invention, if possible. Well, now for the invention.

If, after glancing at the drawing (fortunately we don't have to) which was drawn by Marvin Breeding, you are wondering "What the hell," I shall explain. Marvin and I were feeling silly, one chilly day in August, and decided to design a fighter. After drawing the aerial, we found we had the lead-in stuck through the cockpit cover. Of course, the cover wouldn't slide, but so what? All we had to do was change the lead-in. Did we do it? Hell, no! Why? I don't know.

We fixed a panel under the body which is held on by springs. The pilot pulls a lever and the panel falls to the ground. The panel steps off the lever, which flies back up to the body, pulled by the springs, and is locked by the automatic lock on the inside. The catch is, how the hell does the pilot get back in?

Good-bye, bum!
Van.

Dear Members of this fine organization, I apologize for the nonsense you have read, but the fault lies with yourselves. It only goes to show you the type of entertainment you have provided for this meeting, and although my bleeding heart rebels, it is my solemn duty to reward each of these screwbums, Members Van and Breeding, with a dollar apiece. The success of these twisted props should give great confidence to our other contributors and make it known to the world that Ginsburg is a sucker with his money.

Perhaps, dear friends, you have already noticed that this month the hangar walls are bare of art work, and I hasten to bring you the reason.

An exceedingly talented man whose name is Herman Graff, and who lives at 15537 Lexington Avenue, Harvey, Illinois, has done a job in water color that would be a positive reward for your eyes.

It is a phalanx of Boeing Fighters, moving across the azure sky with the sun casting thin fingers of sunlight across their moving wings. It is seldom that Ginsburg is so impressed with the work of a contributor and it is the simplest justice that Member Graff be awarded the first prize of five dollars. However, as I have said, the work was done delicately and in water color, and unfortunately we do not reproduce color on these pages. To show Herman's job in plain black and white would dishonor the talent he has applied to his work. They would be mere drawings of airplanes. As the work was submitted, it was beautiful—a vivid and pictorial poem of the skies. You take the five bucks, Herman, and welcome to them you are.

Of course it, embarrasses me to speak well of a brother buzzard, inasmuch as the custom is to bat them between their badly laundered ears. Justice forbids this in the case of Herman Graff.

As for you other sky monkeys, there is

evidence at hand that your blades are growing dull. Where, oh where, are the



sky-riding knights of yesterday? Why has Piedra's poetry cooled from a flame to the luke-warm rhythms of the nursery rhyme? Where is the magic touch of Joe Hawkins? Where, indeed, the blunt abuse of Machine-Gun Johnny Boyd?

Ginsburg must look afar for members worthy of his wrath. Ginsburg must slug himself in the chin for lack of more worthy opposition.

Ah, well, gentlemen, there shall be other days. You have conducted this meeting largely by yourselves. You must be aware of how lousy it was.

Thus must I depart; thus do I give wings to myself and calmly steal away, remaining sorrowfully but affectionately yours,

Nosedive.

THE HOT AIR CLUB

February

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DYNAMITE by DARRELL JORDAN on WINGS

It was no trick for Headline Hartley to get himself out of a mess of trouble, and he'd often met Death along the skyroads. But this was another matter—a matter of life or death that looked like a hell of a joke for a guy who had always been dynamite on a pair of wings!

THE night was dark, and the gloomy walls of the 40th American Pursuit Squadron's guardhouse reeked with dampness. To the two men hunched down on the wooden bench it

seemed that they had been sitting there in that cell forever. Jail was no new experience for either Headline Hartley or his pal in trouble, Rocky Rhodes. But this time was different. Never before had they been facing a charge that meant life or death to them.

Headline, ex-crack newshawk, was the exact opposite of Rhodes. Headline was small, freckled, pugnacious. Crazy schemes were his specialty, but an amazing number of them seemed to work. Rocky, huge, tough as a block of granite,

was slow of thought but fast and dangerous in battle. The pair made a team that had carved a name for itself in Air Service circles.

"Yank heroes languish in solitary cell," Headline growled, in the clipped news lead style that had given him his nickname. "Fighting duo faces serious charges!"

"Will you shut that big trap of yours?" Rocky snapped. "Ain't we in dutch enough without you harping on it all the time? Hell, if you hadn't dragged me into town, this wouldn't have happened!"

Headline's red hair seemed to raise straight up. "Why, you big cluck! I noticed that it didn't take much urging to get you to go! I didn't see you back away from any of that cognac! I oughta bat your big ears down for that crack!"

Rocky leaped to his feet. "Come on, runt! If I lick you once more it'll make an even dozen!"

Abruptly the giant dropped his clenched fists and grinned unwillingly. "Aw, let's not be dumb, Headline. This ain't the time for private wars. What we gotta do is figure a way outa this!"

He looked appealingly at his smaller buddy, as usual depending on Headline to do the heavy thinking. Headline grunted sourly. "If I get us outa this jam, I'm a magician. Okay, here's the setup. We go to town last night, and get well plastered in that little dump. When we come back we find that just after we left, the Boche bigshot, Major Kessler, has been forced down nearby, and was brought here. There were to hold him overnight before taking him to H. Q. for questioning. About an hour before we get back, somebody turns Kessler loose and he makes his getaway. There's evidence to show it was us. We can't prove an alibi. Nobody remembers seeing us in town, except the time we left. We take two hours to get here because you, you big dope, run the cycle into a shell hole."

Rocky nodded humbly. "Yeah, I musta felt that quart of cognac a little bit! It was just our luck that Major Rawlins of staff was here when all this happened. He hates our guts anyway, and is he tickled because it looks like we turned Kessler loose! He'll testify against us with the greatest of pleasure!"

"It means a general court, and you know what the penalty is for aiding an enemy to escape, especially a guy H. Q. wanted as bad as Kessler. Yeah, it looks like you and I will be looking at the business end of eight rifles before long!"

"Will you shut up about that?" Rocky roared. "I think of it often enough without you reminding me of it!"

"Shut up! Somebody's coming!" Headline whispered.

Feet tramped outside, and the sentry spoke to someone respectfully. A figure familiar to the two prisoners loomed outside the barred door. The officer standing there was lean and tall, with a hard thin face and sly, slitted eyes. Major Rawlins, of Wing H. Q., had never wasted any love on Headline and Rocky.

"Hartley and Rhodes?" he spoke sharply.

"We're here," Rocky snorted. "We were going out, but we decided to wait for you!"

"Insolence won't help you any," Rawlins said coldly. "I stopped to tell you that I have received orders to take you men to H. Q. for court-martial. Staff is sending a car for us. We will leave in fifteen minutes!"

"Thanks for the lift," Headline grunted. "We were afraid we'd have to walk! I suppose you're all set to testify against us?"

"I'm prepared to tell the truth," Rawlins said stiffly. "Your story won't hold up for a minute in court. You'll both wind up against a stone wall, where you belong. You've been a disturbing element in this Service long enough!"

Rawlins stamped off, stiff with dignity. In spite of his iron nerve, Headline's spine chilled. He couldn't stop thinking about that firing squad. He looked at his watch and saw that dawn was still several hours away. Apparently the court had been set for early morning.

A motorcycle came rattling up the drome, and stopped with a final sputter just outside the guardhouse door. A man approached the sentry and argued violently. Finally the sentry called Headline to the door.

"This guy claims he's got a message for you, to be delivered immediately. Here it is."

Headline took the envelope the guard shoved through the bars. For a moment he fingered it hopefully, then he shrugged. It contained no hacksaw blades, as he had for a second hoped. He stared at the envelope, but the gloom was too intense to allow him to read it.

He felt in his pockets, then turned to Rocky. "Got a match, fella?"

"Naw, I ain't got a match," Rocky snapped. "Didn't they go over us with a fine comb before locking us up?"

"Hey, soldier, slip us some matches," Headline demanded of the sentry, "I gotta read a letter!"

"Nothing doin'," the guard retorted positively. "I got orders, and I ain't lettin' you slick guys put anything over on me. Besides, mail don't mean nothin' to you now."

In spite of the steel bars, the guard drew back as Rocky's opinion of him turned the air to sulphur. Headline shrugged and thrust the letter into the pocket of his tunic. "It'll have to wait," he muttered.

"Yeah, you can read it while the firing squad is loading their rifles," Rocky retorted.

A few moments later, the beam of a flashlight shot in between the bars, and a key grated in the lock. Two ground

guards came in and motioned the prisoners out of the cell. On the field outside a Cadillac idled softly. A sour faced noncom driver sat behind the wheel. Major Rawlins came out of the gloom.

"See that their hands are tied well," he ordered.

FIVE minutes later the Cadillac roared away from the drome and out on the main highway leading back to Divisional H.Q. Major Rawlins sat beside the driver, a Colt balanced in his hand. He kept his eyes fastened on Headline and Rocky in the tonneau. Both men's hands were secured to the robe rail on the back of the driver's seat.

A bright moon scudded out from behind the clouds as the big car hurtled down the rutted road, and the Cadillac swerved past gaping holes, dodged expertly around straggling groups of cursing doughboys.

"A swell night for a Hun bat bomber to slide over," Rocky growled. Then, in a whisper that barely carried to Headline, "I think I've got these ropes started!"

Headline was watching the driver. "Notice how that guy keeps glaring at Rawlins?" he muttered softly. "Like he hated his guts!"

"Who doesn't?" Rocky countered.

"You men shut up," Rawlins blared, waving the automatic. "You can do your talking in court in the morning!"

The Cadillac slowed, forced to a more moderate speed by encountering a long line of troops moving toward the trenches. Headline estimated that there must be at least a regiment. Simultaneously his ears became aware of a shrill, high-pitched drone that cut through the roar of the car.

"Look out, everybody!" he yelled suddenly.

At the same moment a dark winged shape scudded down over the packed

road. *Tac-tac-tac-tac!* The harsh chatter of Spandaus cut dimly through the motor roar, and along the line doughs began to fall, to writhe in the mud. Shouts and screams rent the night. Mingled with them came the hoarsely bawled orders of officers. The non-com jammed on the brakes. The Cadillac swerved and skidded. The Hun ship went screaming on down the long line of troops, guns chattering madly.

"Hun bomber returning from a raid!" Headline yelled. "Probably saw these troops and couldn't resist strafing them!"

"Let's hope he hasn't any bombs left!" Rocky bellowed.

"Now!" Headline hissed. "Can you bust those ropes now?"

Rocky strained and groaned, the veins standing out like ropes on his forehead. "Not yet. . . In a few more minutes!"

The Boche plane had turned and was roaring back, flying in the same direction in which the Cadillac was moving. Again the machine guns screamed down a deadly hail of death, but this time the Yank infantrymen were not quite so defenseless. They lay sprawled flat in the ditches, sending back a defiant rifle fire. Somewhere along the line a Lewis stuttered back at the Spandaus. Headline thought he saw the Hun ship lurch, then it disappeared ahead of them.

All along the roadside came groans and screams for stretcher-bearers. The doughs who could stand were on their feet, and the highway was dotted by the black blots that would never move again. Cursing officers fought to bring order out of chaos and get the column moving.

"Drive on, Corporal," Rawlins ordered harshly. "Let's get out of this mess."

A few miles further on the staff car roared past the last straggler and the road was deserted. Then, so abruptly that the two prisoners were thrown in the corner, the driver swerved the heavy car off

the road. He drew up in a patch of stunted trees, brakes screaming.

"What's the meaning of this?" Rawlins demanded importantly, "Driver, get back on the road and get going! Are you drunk?"

"Naw, I ain't drunk!" The corporal twisted swiftly in his seat. A heavy pistol swung up, to center on Rawlins' chest. "Drop that gun, Major!"

The stunned Major obeyed hastily. His eyes were glued in fascination on the driver's twisting face. When the non-com spoke his voice dripped hatred.

"Rawlins, you don't know me but I know you, all right. Last month you had my brother court-martialed for a job he never done! I been waiting to get even with you, and that Hun plane give me an idea!"

He flung a quick glance at the two prisoners. "I'm gonna knock you off, Rawlins! Then I'm gonna do th' same with those two guys in the back seat. I'll have a swell story. I'll claim they got loose and started somethin', and that in the fight the three of you got killed. I'll square things with you, and prob'ly get a medal for it!"

"Don't!" Rawlins screeched. "Don't shoot! I'll—"

"Take it, you rat!" The corporal pulled the trigger, and the Colt slammed thunderously. Rawlins slumped back with a choked cry as a dark round spot appeared on the front of his tunic. The driver snarled, swung toward the two prisoners. Simultaneously Rocky's huge frame jerked forward. The ropes parted, ripping the robe rail loose. The Yank's big hands shot out, one fastening on the gun, the other on the driver's throat. The Cadillac became instantly the scene of a mad struggle.

HEADLINE strained and wrenched on his own bonds. Suddenly they gave. He leaped from the car and whirled to

help Rocky. The driver was big too, and now he possessed the strength of a maddened animal. Rocky was locked in a deadly embrace with him. Abruptly the door wrenched loose, spilling both fighters to the ground. There came a muffled report, followed by a groan.

Headline jerked the bodies apart roughly. "Rocky, you okay?" he barked frantically.

"Sure," Rocky clambered to his feet. "Where were you when the lights went out?"

"I just got loose," the ex-reporter snapped.

Rocky grinned, looking down at the lifeless driver. "Well, we're loose, and Rawlins' croaked. All we gotta do is report this—"

Headline jerked his pal around roughly. "Look, you big halfwit! Don't you see the jam we're in now? We start for H.Q. to face a court with the noncom and the officer who's bringing the charges. They're killed on the way. This means we're stuck with two murders!"

"What! You mean they'll figure *we* croaked these guys?"

"You're damned right! Nothing on earth would make 'em see it any different. Rocky, we're as good as dead right now!"

"Cripes! What'll we do?"

Headline scowled. "Master mind racks brains for solution. I'll tell you one thing; we can't hang around here. Load those bodies in the back seat!"

A moment later the Cadillac swung back onto the road. Covered by a robe on the floor were the bodies of the corporal and Major Rawlins. Headline drove rapidly, and his brain tried to keep pace with the racing car. They'd have to hide the bodies. . . . No, that couldn't be explained, either.

His foot reached for the brake as a figure stepped into the road in front of the car. For a moment he hesitated. He

could run the guy down and keep going, but that meant an immediate alarm. No, their best chance was to bluff it through. He pulled the Cadillac to a halt. The man in the road wore a helmet and leather flying coat.

"That damned Boche night flyer downed me before he started strafing the road," the pilot explained. "Could you give me a lift to the next P.C.? I can get transportation there."

"Get on the running board and hang on," Headline grunted with relief. Barring accidents they'd soon be rid of the stranger without his suspecting anything.

The car roared again into motion, and several miles reeled beneath the wheels as Headline's frantic brain strove to find a solution to their problem.

"Turn here," the flyer said suddenly.

Headline grunted. "This isn't a taxi. We're going straight ahead, fella. If you want to turn you can get off!"

"I said *turn here, swine*," the pilot's voice grated.

Headline felt something prod his back. He looked, saw a long-barreled Luger jammed against him. His startled eyes swept the stranger's face and suddenly the Yank cursed himself savagely. The guy was a Hun—in all probability the pilot of that strafing bomber! The flyer seemed to read his mind.

"Ja," he snarled, his voice coming guttural. "I am a German. A lucky bullet from the ground forced me down in that field there. Luckily, I can speak English. Now drive this car into the field! I need tools, and oil. I'll shoot at the first false move you make!"

Swiftly Headline counted the chances; not one in a hundred that he could turn on the Hun and grab the gun before a slug ripped his life out. Suddenly a plan burst full fledged in his racing brain. He gave Rocky a quieting nudge, then obediently swung the Cadillac from the road into the field.

The tires skidded and spun in the soft earth, but the car slowly picked up speed. They went bouncing and swaying across the rough field. Not more than a quarter mile from the road a dim shape loomed before them. The plane was a Hanover, with bomb racks fitted beneath. Now, however, the racks were empty. A body was stretched beneath the wing.

"My observer was killed tonight," the German said harshly. "To avenge him is one reason why I stopped on my return home to strafe that road."

Under the steady menace of the Hun's Luger Headline and Rocky clambered from the car. Headline nudged his huge partner and whispered softly. "Yank flyers take desperate chance. Listen, dope, I've got an idea. When I give the word, jump the guy!"

"I need tools to repair a severed feed line, and oil, if possible," the Hun explained again. "Is there, by any chance, spare oil in your car?"

"Yeah, there's several cans under that blanket in the back seat," Headline said swiftly. "I'll get 'em for you!"

As he had hoped, his eagerness made the Hun suspicious. "*Nein*, I'll get them myself. You come along, but keep your distance."

"He's gonna get an awful shock when he sees those two dead men," Headline muttered quickly. "Then's our chance to grab him!"

They followed the German to the car. With one hand the Hun reached in and pulled back the blanket, at the same time watching the Yanks carefully. Abruptly he stiffened, drawing back in horror. His eyes swung to rest in fascination on the sight beneath the blanket. Simultaneously both Headline and Rocky leaped forward.

THE Luger spat flame and smoke over Headline's body as he launched a tackle at the Hun's knees. Again the gun flamed, but the slug went wild as the Hun

topped. Rocky's big body came slamming down upon the other two with a tremendous impact. Something snapped with a thin, horrible sound. Rocky got up, yanked the groggy Headline to his feet. Headline wavered, then his fist smacked solidly against Rocky's jaw.

"You big clown!" he snapped, "I'll teach you to jump on me when I'm down! You nearly broke my back!"

"Why the hell don't you keep out of grown men's way when there's a fight?" Rocky growled. "Always underfoot!"

"Cripes, you *did* break the guy's neck!" Headline muttered, staring down. "I thought at first it was mine!"

Rocky shuddered. "Well, he asked for it," he mumbled. "Now, what's the bright idea of yours?"

"We put Rawlins and this dead Jerry down in the fuselage," Headline explained swiftly. "Then we get this crate going, fly around awhile, and report at H. Q. Get it?"

"Not by a damned sight!" Rocky scowled. "What good's that gonna do us?"

"Here's our yarn," Headline went on. "We say this German stopped us, and forced us out here. He wants to take us back as prisoners to his *staffel*. That means Rawlins, you and I. In the fight, the driver and the observer are killed. Their bodies'll be here to prove it. But later, when the guy lands, you and I and Rawlins overpower him, but Rawlins gets killed. Then we fly home with the dead Hun and Rawlins' body. There'll be enough evidence to support the yarn so that it ought to clear us of killing Rawlins!"

Rocky nodded dubiously. "It's plenty screwy, but no more so than most of your ideas. I don't see anything better. But that'll mean four of us in this crate!"

"If it can carry two men and a load of bombs, it'll fly with just four men. You get those two bodies down in the fuse-

lage back of the rear pit. I'll get this motor fixed. We'll leave the other Hun and the car with the driver in it here. They'll be found and they'll help back our story."

Both Yanks worked with desperate haste, for at any minute they might be discovered. Someone must have marked the landing place of the Hanover. A few minutes later Headline twisted the prop, and the Hanover's motor drummed into life. Rocky had already stowed their macabre cargo in the fuselage.

Suddenly shouts sounded from the distant road. The bright moonlight had disclosed the Hanover to passing troops. Headline saw a bunch of men start across the field. Rifles began to crack and slugs whistled overhead.

"Yank ace has brainstorm!" Headline barked, whirling on Rocky. "Listen, fella. I've got an idea!"

"What, another?" Rocky groaned from the rear pit.

"Yeah! Look, did you notice the insignia on this crate? Well, it belongs to Kessler's *staffel*, the guy we're supposed to have turned loose! Let's clear ourselves all around! With this Boche ship I bet we can get close to Kessler's drome. If we can snag him, take him back with us, everything'll be swell!"

"I was afraid of this!" Rocky moaned. "You'll need a railroad Pullman if you get any more passengers for this crate!"

"We'll maybe get a chance to grab another ship," Headline argued. "Hell, it can't do any harm to try!"

"Oh, no! Beyond getting us killed!" Rocky snarled. But he knew the uselessness of arguing with Headline when the little guy had a hot idea. "Get this crate moving, hophead, before those doughs riddle us!"

Headline nodded, slammed the throttle wide open. The Hanover roared, waddled slowly forward. The bullets came faster now as the Yanks plainly saw the German

Maltese crosses. Headline ducked and held his breath as the Hanover picked up speed, lifted slowly into the air. The ex-newshawk breathed a long sigh of relief. Save for a marked tailheavy tendency, the Hanover carried the four passengers with ease.

Swiftly the Hanover bored toward the lines, while the two madcap Yanks prayed that no Allied bat patrols would spot them. Headline, familiar with the location of every German squadron in the sector, held a straight course.

If they could only grab Kessler from his own field. The plan was desperate but possible. Headline knew the fact that they had been seen by the Yank infantrymen was a break. Their story should account for Rawlins' death, at least.

Once into Hun air, the two maniacs breathed easier, and soon a glance at his watch told Headline that dawn was a scant hour away. Time was growing desperately short. The freckled ace formed a picture in his mind of the emergency field, perhaps a mile from Kessler's drome. He sent the Hanover booming boldly over the drome, then swung back. He closed the throttle and eased the Hanover down toward the dark field. The moon was gone now, and the first gray light of dawn was sweeping from the east. Headline called on every ounce of his flying skill as he guided the tailheavy crate down. The ground loomed up with awful suddenness, and Headline hauled back on the stick and prayed for luck. The wheels struck, bounced crazily. The tail came down with a bang and the Hanover rolled to a stop.

"Miraculous landing by famous pilot," Headline crowed, squirming to the ground. Rocky dropped beside him. "You lucky stiff! You couldn't do that again in a hundred years!"

"Shut up and come on," Headline retorted. "We're calling on Herr Major Kessler!"

"This is the last time I'll go joy-riding with you—with a couple of corpses for company," Rocky growled.

They set off swiftly through the deep grass toward the fringe of trees that separated the small field from Kessler's main drome. If the Hanover's landing had been noticed, it was sure to be investigated. But the hour was one when vigilance was apt to be slack. They halted in the trees, staring out at the quiet drome. Soon the dawn patrols would be called and the place would be humming with activity. Headline knew that Kessler's *staffel* was composed of two squadrons, one Hanover light bombers, and the other Pfalz scouts.

"See those two small buildings?" Headline whispered. "One of 'em must be the Operations office, because they're both lighted. We'll separate here, and each take one building to investigate. If you find Kessler, the idea is to get the drop on him and get him back to the ship, or to some other ship. If either one of us gets caught, the other is to make his getaway, understand? No use both of us getting nabbed. Now get going and don't take any chances!"

"My Gawd!" Rocky muttered as he melted into the gloom. "The guy says don't take any chances!"

HEADLINE swung cautiously toward the building he had picked. A faint glimmer of light shone from drawn shades. Once he was forced to wait, crouched against the ground, while a sleepy field guard ambled past. Instantly Headline was up, moving swiftly toward the sheet-iron shack. The roar of a starting motor startled him. He could barely make out the shadowy outlines of three two-seaters being trundled to the line before a hangar. Doors banged and voices called gutturally as the field came to life. The Yank waited, cursing before the chance came to cross a strip of open

ground. He realized now that his plan had been sheer madness. But with characteristic bulldog persistence, he meant to go through with it.

A short dash brought him panting to the rear of the building, and he peered cautiously beneath the shade. The room inside was evidently an office. A big man sat at a desk, leafing through a pile of papers. As he turned Headline noted the insignia of rank and nodded triumphantly. The man was a Major, unmistakably Major Kessler. A second officer stood before the desk, receiving orders. Headline fumed with impatience. If that guy would only leave. . .

It was too risky to tackle both Huns at once. Twice the second officer seemed ready to leave, only to be called back. Headline tensed. He could wait no longer. Another ten minutes would bring enough light to make him visible on the field.

As he straightened determinedly an orderly ran into the office, saluted Kessler.

"*Herr* Major, there are two American spies on the field! We just now—"

Kessler and his subordinate waited for no more. Snatching out automatics, they dashed from the building. Headline had barely time to draw back before they raced past him. But where was Rocky? Someone had tipped the Huns off. If Rocky had been captured the Germans wouldn't have known that another Yank was near. Rocky would let them tear his tongue out before he squealed.

Behind Headline a gun banged and lead smacked the wall an inch beside his head. He whirled, Colt snapping up. A big Prussian was lunging in, bayonet poised. The Colt roared, and down went the Hun, the Mauser falling from limp fingers. Headline wheeled and dashed toward the fringe of trees. Behind him thudded shadowy figures, and hoarse yells came from the pack as they sighted

the fugitive. Rifles and pistols slammed echoes in the near-dawn.

The freckled ace ran like a deer, desperation lending wings to his feet. Once he glanced back, saw that he was outdistancing the heavier footed Germans. From the drome came shouts and the staccato roar of starting motors. Headline knew the Huns' thoughts as if they had been in his own brain. They knew he had a ship, might even know where it was. Planes were being sent up to knock him down when he took off.

He uncorked another burst of speed that lasted until he reached the Hanover. Thankful that he had left the motor idling, he flung himself into the pit and gunned the throttle. The Hanover bounced crazily into the air.

Headline came around in a tight circle as the two-seater picked up flying speed. Then, straight as an arrow he slammed back, down across Kessler's drome. A Pfalz just taking off loomed before him and Headline stabbed the triggers and the Spandaus pumped a stream of lead. The Pfalz nosed over, went flaming into the ground.

HADLINE went on without swerving an inch. The Hanover's big motor bawled a steady song as he went hedge-hopping toward the lines. The little freckled Yank's heart was a lump of lead in his chest as his mind flashed over the night's happenings. It was all his fault. Now Rocky was gone, and he had failed to capture Kessler. Red rage flamed in his heart as he shot the Hanover higher.

A glance back showed a pair of Pfalz scouts thundering in pursuit. Even nearer were two Hanovers, each apparently carrying but one man. Slowly the gap between pursuers and pursued narrowed. In the gray dawn light Headline fought his ship up, striving for altitude. He *had* to get back, had to clear Rocky's name in some way.

Both of the other two-seaters were close, now, and Headline saw fluttering commander's pennons flying from the struts of the nearest one. The would be Kessler himself! Hope flamed in Headline's brain. If he could down Kessler— At that moment the second Hanover roared alongside. Just in time Headline stayed his hand on the triggers. He saw a huge man in the front pit, a giant who waved wildly. Headline choked. Cripes! It was Rocky! The big guy had grabbed a Boche ship for himself!

Both Yanks whirled their crates toward the *staffel* leader's ship. The streamered plane drew back, but the Pfalzes closed in with stuttering guns. Out of the corner of his eye Headline saw more coming up in the distance. He darted at the nearest Pfalz, suddenly flung his ship into a wingover. As the two-seater roared down, the Spandaus clattered savagely. The Pfalz stalled suddenly, and flame swept back in the pilot's face. Headline laughed wildly, ruddered around just in time to see Rocky batter down the second Pfalz. Again the two Yanks turned their planes toward the lines.

From there it was fight, whirl to gain a mile nearer home, then turn to fight again. The Huns followed persistently as the scrap worked into Yank air. Through a haze of smoke and battle roar, Headline realized that the drome almost beneath them was their own, the 40th. Time and again he strove to close with the streamered two-seater, but each time Kessler's ship slipped away from combat.

Suddenly Headline gave a roar of triumph. The pilots of the Pfalz scouts, nervous so deep in Yank territory, abruptly wheeled and scudded for home. And so quickly did they turn that Kessler's ship was caught napping. As its pilot started to whirl, Headline darted in savagely, Spandaus hammering. He

glimpsed Rocky's ship wobbling down to a landing on the far end of the 40th's drome. Then he gave all his attention to hammering that Hanover out of the sky.

The other fought back desperately, wheeling toward Germany a dozen times, but always Headline was there, blocking escape. The end came with dazzling swiftness. As the German two-seater banked, Headline rolled his own bus twice, snapping level under his enemy's belly. He snatched the stick back, holding the plane in a stall. And in that position the Spandau hurled the last slugs in the belts up into the vitals of Kessler's ship. Headline swooped away as his foe started down in a series of aimless glides.

Headline landed and stopped not fifty feet from the half-wrecked *staffel* leader's ship. Rocky came running over.

"Well, I got Kessler, anyway," Headline grinned.

Rocky stared. "*You* got Kessler? Hell I did! He was running for his ship back on his drome and I tapped him on the skull, jammed him in the back pit, then took off! See, the field guards are grabbing him now!"

Headline looked, saw two Yanks lifting a groggy Hun from Rocky's rear pit. The man was Kessler, all right!

"Then who—" he began. He dove into the wreckage of the plane he had downed, and the next second he had dragged the pilot forth. Shaken with horror, Headline found himself looking down into the dying features of Major Rawlins!

"God!" Rocky's face was white. "How—"

Headline was examining a dried blood stain on Rawlins tunic. Then he held up a ripped notebook and a dented steel mirror.

"That shot the noncom driver took at him was deflected by this stuff," Headline muttered. "Only knocked him out and inflicted a flesh wound. He must

have come to in the plane when we went to Kessler's drome, then followed us and stole Kessler's ship. Boy, we're sunk now. I killed Rawlins—and here comes a staff general and a couple of M. P.'s! Rocky, I've gotta talk if I ever did!"

Headline braced himself and his brain raced as the General came up to them. The officer's glance fell on Rawlins, and Headline almost fainted. For the General was holding out his hand—and grinning.

"I'm ready for the handcuffs," Headline mumbled. "You see, it was like this. . ."

"I can see what happened," the General broke in. "That envelope containing the orders I sent you last night; well, you certainly carried them out. You see, our Intelligence dug up the fact that Kessler and Rawlins were connected in civil life. The German had something on Rawlins. When someone released Kessler the other night, we were sure it was Rawlins himself. But when he accused you two men, I decided to wait until he was in the court before jumping him. That's why I sent you that message, warning you to make no break. Even though you were tied, Rawlins didn't know that it was really *you* who were taking *him* to trial! When I heard that a Hun had held you up and taken you in a ship to Germany, I was pretty worried. But here you not only finish Rawlins and save us a trial, but you bring back Kessler too! I think two weeks in Paris would be about right for you gentlemen!"

Headline thought numbly of the unread orders in his pocket, orders he had forgotten until now. Then he said, "Newsmen always come through. It took careful planning, General, to carry out your orders!"

Then he sat down weakly, as his brain spun dizzily. Beside him Rocky seemed even dizzier.

Rifles in the Dawn



The eight rifles raised as one.

by HAL WHITE



CHAPTER ONE

Satan Has a Double

*The trail may
end in glory or in
blood—and a man may earn
himself some medals or some lead!
Death speaks the last word in every
conversation, but no man likes to
die before—Rifles In The Dawn!*

THE twilight patrol was warming on the line, the deep thunder of motors racketing from wall to sheet-iron wall of hangars and hutments on the drome of the 61st Pursuit Squadron.

The noise filled the soft summer air, blanketed the hum of the approaching car, and Major Frank Redding, alone in the Operations office, did not know of its

coming until he saw it draw up outside the window in a cloud of dust.

The major's worried blue eyes lighted, and he struck the desk top strongly with the flat of his hand. This must be the agent from Intelligence, and Heaven knew he needed him! The 61st—the whole sector—had a spy problem that so far had defied their best efforts at solving it.

The C. O., a slender, middle-aged man, leaned his sinewy body back in his desk chair, waiting impatiently, the throb of the car's motor barely audible through the vibrant thrum of the five Hissos on the line.

A moment, and the door swung wide. A man stood there, a clean-cut, smartly-uniformed silhouette against the red glow of the setting sun and the rosy swirl of dust kicked up by the departing car.

"Come in," the major invited. "Sun's in my eyes. I can't see you."

The newcomer stepped in, closed the door, and stood briefly with his back against it. The major stared, his brow wrinkling in puzzlement and irritation.

"You, Lieutenant," he said in mild surprise. "You're taking out your flight in five minutes. Why aren't you—?"

The other shook his head, his gray eyes narrowing slightly. He advanced quickly to the desk, laid papers on the polished surface.

"Sun must have blinded you, sir," he said quietly. "I'm Curt Ballard, reporting for duty."

The C. O. continued to stare. His eyes traveled up and down the slim figure in the tailored dress uniform, returned to bore fixedly into the newcomer's steady gray gaze. "If this is your idea of a joke, Lockhart, it's in mighty poor taste."

The young officer smiled faintly, but the gray eyes under the rakishly cocked cap were hard. "Mistaken identity, Major Redding. I am Curt Ballard—from G-2." He touched the papers on the desk with slender, steely fingers. "You'll find

my credentials are all in order, sir."

The major blinked. Then he dropped his gaze to the large envelope before him, opened it, and skimmed the contents. One hand went up to wipe a thin dew of perspiration from his bald forehead as he read.

When he had finished, he laid the papers down and looked up with a puzzled grin twitching at his close-clipped black mustache. "My mistake, it seems," he admitted. "But it's still hard to believe. You and Leslie Lockhart aren't twin brothers, by any chance, are you? Lockhart isn't an assumed name?"

G-2's famous secret agent shook his head. "It's his real name, and we're no relation."

"You knew Lockhart was here?"

"Certainly. It's our business to have all the information about a unit's personnel—in advance."

The major nodded. "Of course. Sit down, Lieutenant. Cigarette?"

"Thanks," Ballard took one, leaned to the light which the major held. Inhaled deeply, let smoke drift slowly from mouth and nose.

Something in the grim set of the young officer's jaw, the undertone of strain in his voice, impelled the major to another question. "You know Lockhart—this double of yours—personally?"

Ballard hesitated, sudden, haggard distress in the gray eyes. "I did—once. Haven't seen him for some years." And then, with an apologetic lift of the tailored shoulders. "You have a job for me here, sir?"

"Lord, yes!" The C. O. blew smoke savagely, then lowered his voice and leaned forward to make his guarded tones audible above the blip of warming motors outside. "Information is getting through to the enemy in this sector, and the 61st is under suspicion. But I don't need to tell you that. You know it already. We've got to—"

HE BROKE off abruptly as feet thumped on the steps outside, and the door opened. It closed again, and an officer in flying clothes stood with his trim shoulders against the panels. There was a moment's tense silence in the little room as Curt Ballard and Leslie Lockhart stared at each other.

The major broke the tableau with swift words. "Les, I understand you two have met before. Lieutenant Ballard is joining us—from the French *escadrille*."

Ballard stood up, the cigarette in his dangling left hand sending a wavering curl of blue smoke up along his arm to the single silver bar of a first lieutenant that glinted on his shoulder. For a long moment that smoke was the only thing in the room that moved. Then Ballard spoke:

"Hello, Les. It's been a long time." He took a step toward the other, hand outstretched, a smile on his lips. Lockhart relaxed with a visible effort. He strode forward, and the two gripped hands.

"Hello, Curt," Lockhart said. "Glad to see you again."

But his face showed that he lied. His tones were forced, his smile an artificial thing, and deep in the caverns of his gray eyes the major saw hate that smoldered redly.

Ballard saw it, too, and there was a thickness in his voice as he answered. "It's good to find you once more, Les."

"Yeah," Lockhart said. "We'll have things to talk about. Plenty of things. But right now—you'll excuse me, Curt? My flight is waiting."

He turned to the C. O. "Bill Sydenham is knocked out, skipper. Ptomaine, *he* says. Jitters, more likely. He had a narrow squeak yesterday. Anyway, I'm short a man."

"Let *me* go," Ballard cut in quickly. "I'd like to get my hand in. If it's okay with you, Major—and you, Les."

Lockhart's mouth tightened, then wid-

ened in a forced smile. "All right with me."

The C. O. looked from one to the other of the two men. "Sounds like a good idea," he said quietly.

"Take me just two minutes to get into my togs," Ballard said, and both pilots started for the door.

"Good luck, boys," the major smiled. But when the door had closed the smile faded, and the eyes of the C. O. were once more somber with worry.

Outside, the two men walked a few steps, and then stopped, facing each other. Hate flamed undisguised in Lockhart's eyes now, and Ballard said slowly, "I was hoping you'd changed, Les."

"Changed?" Lockhart snarled. "Damn you, Ballard, why should I change? For four years I've hated your guts—and I always will!"

"You're unreasonable, Les. There's no good reason—"

"Before you're through, you'll wish to God you'd never seen this place, Ballard!"

The eyes of the secret agent narrowed. "Meaning—?"

Lockhart gestured contemptuously. "Get into your flying togs. The flight's waiting." He turned away abruptly, strode across the tarmac.

Ballard stared after him, his mouth frozen in a thin, grim line. Then he turned and continued on to the hutment where the orderly had stowed his baggage.

THE five Spads whirled up from the dusty tarmac like a flock of startled quail and drilled swiftly eastward, the rays of the setting sun behind them throwing bright glints from their metal work as they sped away.

Several of the pilots were muttering amazedly to themselves as they hugged the sticks to their belt buckles and climbed for altitude. Lockhart had introduced them to Ballard before the flight took off, and

they were still numb with astonishment at the striking resemblance between the two men. Ballard saw heads turn toward him from time to time, and teeth flashed in friendly grins.

The young secret agent returned the grins mechanically, but the eyes behind the goggles were gloomy with thought. Lockhart had certainly lost no time in showing his contempt for the new man. He had assigned Ballard to the position of No. 2 on the left, between the point man and Sid Curtis.

A fledgling position, that, and Curtis, who had had little experience, regularly flew there. Ballard was far from a fledgling, and Lockhart must have known it.

But the secret agent didn't mind the deliberate insult, except as it showed Lockhart's attitude, which might make it tough going for the man from G-2. He remembered Lockhart's veiled threat:

"Before you're through, you'll wish to God you'd never seen this place, Ballard!"

The Intelligence man had earned his spurs in a score of dangerous missions, on both sides of the lines. There was not an ounce of fear in all his lithe, muscular body. No fear of anything that Lockhart might threaten, or attempt. He could face this other man, so strangely like himself, any time, any place.

"But I hope I don't have to do it," he groaned. "We were friends once—the sort of friendship that comes only once in a lifetime. And now—" His eyes dwelt on the rigid back of the flight leader, and his thoughts yearned across the space.

"My God, Les, why can't you understand? . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

The Dice Roll Death

OVER the lines, and the archies reared back on their haunches and bayed at the high wings like angry wolves. Blobs

of smoke bloomed in the clear air like spattered ink, and shrapnel reached hungrily for the spinning props that cleaved the sky.

Sid Curtis, green to this business, paled slightly, and wiped beads of sweat from his upper lip. Bert Channing, equally new, winced in his cockpit as the heavy "*Pom! Pom!*" of the missiles shook his ship.

Lockhart and big, raw-boned Ole Anderson, veteran of war skies, paid no attention. As for Ballard, he hardly heard the bombardment. The flight crossed, untouched, and roared on.

Ballard saw the enemy ships before Lockhart did. They were roosting high, behind a bank of clouds like bobcats lurking in heavy treetops. Only the faintest yellowish-blue tinge of flaming exhaust gas revealed them. But Ballard spotted it, and blipped his motor savagely to get Lockhart's attention.

But Lockhart roared on, unheeding. Ballard cursed into the prop blast, and jiggled the throttle across the brass in a series of blasting warnings. And then Lockhart, who had been leaning over the coaming, scanning the green countryside eight thousand feet below, straightened with a jerk and tilted his helmeted head to look up.

Almost straight up he looked, for in those few seconds the flight had eaten a lot of space. And what he saw they all saw, now. The Germans were hiding no longer. Breaking from the cloud cover, they came whooping down in steep power dives, white vapor trailing like wisps of smoke from their black wings. Seven of them!

They came snarling, red-eyed with the sudden fire of Spandaus, fanged with hot lead. Lockhart signaled open formation, and spun his own crate on a wingtip. Every man for himself now. Get out from under, claw for altitude, and God help you if you didn't do it fast!

Ballard was off with the speed of a thrown dart. Anderson kicked into a

lightning-swift Immelmann and grinned at the tracer stream which burned the air where he had been. Lockhart was off to the side, shinning up the sky like a monkey up a palm tree.

Channing, awkward but desperately in haste, dodged smashing lead by the width of a flying wire, and gained clear air. But Sid Curtis—poor, fuddled, round-faced kid—moved too slowly, and the searing blast of twin Spandaus caught him squarely amidships.

The pink cheeks that had scarcely known the touch of a razor felt now the savage rip of Death's grim scythe, and red spilled down his chin as his head went back in agony.

The Spad plunged, and the enemy pilot hauled the Albatross into a zoom. Ballard came around in a vertical bank, leveled, and the Vickers tubes spewed vengeance at the Hun. The black ship reeled, slid off, then followed the screaming Spad to the carpet.

Ballard, circling, saw Channing in trouble, and he dodged through the swirl of wings and the mad chatter of guns to the boy's aid. But two Huns closed in behind the G-2 man, and four streams of vicious lead began clawing at him. He had to let Channing go, sideslip to save himself.

And then a gray ship cut squarely across his prop boss. It was a few feet below his line of flight, so he could not dive to avoid collision, but had to haul into a sharp zoom instead.

His ship hung for a moment, almost vertical, prop grabbing for air, and in that motionless moment the two German ships laced him fore and aft. A flying wire let go with a ringing snap, and his instrument board rained jagged fragments of glass into his upturned face. Then the Spad took the controls, swung over, and by the grace of fate and his own skill he was diving—in the clear. The whole action had been bewilderingly fast, but he had seen and recognized the man who had cut

him off. Lockhart! He was not mistaken.

PPULLING out of his dive, he wiped blood from his face and fed gas to the Hisso. Climbing, he dodged a gray ship coming down. Channing! In flames! He groaned with pity for the boy, then yelled into the slipstream as he saw Anderson, with his tracer bullets as a whiplash, maneuver two of the black ships into a mid-air smash.

Lockhart was hot on the trail of another, and behind Lockhart was a pursuing Hun. A procession of three, with the Yank in the middle. Ballard, coming up from below, nailed the second Albatross with a burst through the belly, and the German dropped.

Lockhart was close behind his prey now, and Ballard saw that the fleeing German ship wore the pennons of command. Lockhart had him cold turkey. Couldn't miss.

But he did miss! His guns yammered briefly, then fell silent, and Ballard saw him hammering furiously at the breeches of his Vickers with a clenched fist.

But the German flight leader wasn't pushing his luck any further. He signaled his comrades, and the three black ships heeled over and raced eastward. Lockhart, still whacking at the gun breech, spread his hands suddenly in a gesture of despair, and signaled the flight homeward.

Ballard made that trip with bitterness in his heart. Lockhart had tried to kill him by forcing him into a whipstall for the pursuing Germans to riddle, and he had nearly succeeded. The thing had been no accident. Lockhart was too skillful a pilot to cut across a man's bows without intention.

What was behind it? Only a savage individual hate, or was there something more? Did Lockhart know, or suspect, that Ballard was a G-2 man? Was Lockhart, by any chance, mixed up in this spy plot?

"No, no, that's impossible!" he told himself. "Les has his faults, God knows, but he'd never sell out his country. Not that!"

And yet—

Curt Ballard's tortured mind was still revolving the puzzle when the flight landed and taxied to the deadline. Lockhart, center ship of the three, climbed out of his cockpit, stood face to face with Ballard. Each man lifted his goggles, and out of the tight masks of their faces, black with powder fumes and oil, their white-rimmed eyes glared at each other. Ballard spoke first:

"Better luck next time, fella!"

"Whaddya mean?" Lockhart snarled. But his eyes wavered away for an instant, and Ballard saw that the thrust had gone home.

"You tried to hang me up, like a target on a board, for the Hun snipers to riddle me."

"And if I did, Ballard?" Lockhart's low tones were thick with venom. "You remember, perhaps, the last thing I said to you—four years ago?"

Ballard nodded grimly. "I remember."

"A score to settle between ourselves, Ballard, and no one else the wiser. Whatever else you may be, you're not a squealer, eh?"

"Don't let that worry you," Ballard said very quietly. And then he turned away, because the mechs were watching them curiously, and the major was coming across the tarmac.

Anderson was standing in front of his ship, thoughtfully inspecting the bullet holes in the motor cowlings. He spoke softly as Ballard passed him. "Has the man no eyes in his head? It's the third time that's happened."

"You mean—?"

"I mean barging right under a Hun flight instead of spotting them in time." Anderson's eyes were angry.

"They were hard to see, up there in

that cumulus," Ballard said, thoughtfully.

"Yeah?" Anderson's powder-blackened lips twisted. "You saw them, and I saw them. But Lockhart didn't. And two boys die without a chance for their lives. That's—"

"It's one of those things," Ballard shrugged. But his own eyes were speculative as he went to meet the major. In the Operations office the two men talked soberly.

"**A**NDERSON'S bitter about what happened," Ballard said. "He thinks Lockhart should have seen those German ships sooner. Says it's happened before, the same way. What's your opinion, Major?"

"It has happened before," the major said, "and I've wondered about it. But I can't believe—"

"I can't either," Ballard said. "I think it was coincidence. I don't think he did it deliberately. Les isn't himself. For one thing, he's so busy hating me that he wasn't normal out there today."

The major hesitated. "If you care to tell me what's behind all this hatred, Ballard, I'd like to hear it. We ought to have all the cards on the table if we're going to straighten out this spy tangle, you know."

Ballard lighted a cigarette, shook out the match. "You have a right to know, Major." He was silent a moment, then he said slowly, "I met Leslie Lockhart six years ago—in Berlin."

The major started, and his eyes narrowed. "In Berlin!"

"Yes. It was one of those chance meetings that sometimes make truth stranger than fiction. Our parents thought we needed some school over there to round out our education in the States, and we met at the German capital."

"Yes?"

"We chased around together at first because we looked so much alike that we

got fun out of fooling people—no one knew which was which. Then we discovered that we liked each other a hell of a lot, and we were together all the time.

"Les was a good kid. A bit spoiled by a millionaire father and a doting mother. Reckless, and he had a vicious temper. But he was smart as a whip and likeable, always ready for a fight or a frolic. I never had a better friend."

"And then—?"

"In the spring of 1914, shortly before we finished our school courses, we met a girl. Rita Sundstrom, an art student. American."

"And you both fell in love with her!"

Ballard nodded. "Exactly! I won, Lockhart lost. Well,"—Ballard's voice was suddenly brittle with emotion—"Les couldn't take it. He just about went crazy. Tried to kill me once in a barroom brawl. He was drunk, of course. And the last thing he ever said to me was 'I'll get you sometime.'"

"And you've never seen him since—until now?"

"No. I married Rita shortly after that, and returned to the States."

"And he stayed in Berlin?"

"No, he went home, too. I didn't see him, but I heard that he went completely to hell. Drink, women—even dope. His father cut him off without a cent, threw him out bodily. And then the war began, and I got the rumor that he'd gone into the Foreign Legion. It probably saved him."

"He had a good record in the Legion," the major said.

"And he's a crack pilot, here."

"One of the best. But with a sullenness and bitterness in him that I never could understand until now. Look here, Ballard, this is a blunt thing to say, but you don't suppose his two years in Berlin—"

"Made him a German sympathizer? I

doubt it, though it did give him—and me, too, for that matter—an excellent knowledge of the German language."

"Hell," the major said, "forget it, Ballard. Guess I'm getting jittery. Somebody in this outfit is a spy, and I've come to the point where it doesn't take much to make me suspect a man. What do we do next?"

Ballard leaned forward, crushed out the cigarette in the ash tray. "Keep our eyes open. Our man, whoever he is, will make a slip sooner or later, and we'll nab him. Meantime, nobody should know that I'm G-2. I'm just a pilot, one of the gang. Right?"

"Right. I'll help all I can. We've got to get results—*got* to! And in a hurry. Unless we can stop this leak, GHQ's plans for a big drive may run into a stone wall. You know that."

Ballard nodded, his jaw like rock. "We'll get results!"

CHAPTER THREE

Renegade Ace

RESULTS! Mingling with the crowd in the canteen, that evening, Curt Ballard's heart was heavy. Lockhart was there, at the far end of the bar. He was drinking steadily, but the fiery liquor seemed to have no more effect on him than so much water.

When his eyes met Ballard's, down the length of the bar, a savage light flamed in them, but he said nothing. He merely turned back to his loud, reckless conversation with the two or three who stood near—

est him.

"Cognac," Ballard told the barman. When the drink was set before him, he tossed it off at a gulp, turned and went out. He had something to do that he detested with every fiber of his being. He had not told the major his suspicions, but he felt that Leslie Lockhart would bear

watching. That business of running the flight into ambush. It could happen once, it might even happen twice, by accident. But three times—!

Ballard found the hutments deserted. With a skeleton key, he let himself into Lockhart's cubicle. With his pocket flash, he made a swift but thorough search—and found nothing. Several empty cognac bottles under the table testified to Lockhart's excessive drinking, but everything else was just like any other pilot's quarters.

"He drinks alone," Ballard told himself, looking at the heap of bottles. "When a man does that, it's bad. But it doesn't make a traitor of him."

Nor did anything else in the little room make a traitor of Leslie Lockhart, and Ballard, going to his own quarters, felt relieved. "Maybe I'm wrong, suspecting him," he thought. "I hope I am."

Ballard flew with "A" Flight the next noon, Captain Brinley at point. They ran into a nasty concentration of black ships, two miles behind the German lines, and lost a man. But it was no fault of the flight leader, nor of anyone else. Just the fortunes of war.

Three days went by, and Ballard probed everywhere but discovered nothing. GHQ, with the Allied drive looming, sent word through Wing that there was still a leak, and that it must be found—or else! Wing jumped Major Redding, and Redding talked worriedly with Ballard.

"There isn't a thing, yet, that I can put my finger on," the secret agent admitted, his gray eyes haggard with strain. "Our man, whoever he is, is clever as hell."

"And unless we can lay hands on him, the big drive will fail," the major said bitterly. "I'm not criticizing you, Ballard, but this situation is getting desperate."

AND then "B" Flight went out on a morning patrol, with Lockhart leading, and lost two more men, one of them

a fledgling making his first flight over the lines. Nothing suspicious about that, necessarily, but when Ballard learned from Anderson that the flight had been ganged by seven ships of the Baron von Breck's *staffel*, hiding above, behind a cloud bank, he grew very thoughtful.

"None of us saw them until they dived," Anderson said. "I don't blame Lockhart this time, but it was a damned unlucky business."

Ballard went to his hutment with his brow screwed into a frown. And that night, when a dozen officers of the squadron went to the village for an evening at the *estaminet*, he went with them.

Lockhart was there, but he had little to say to anyone. He was sullen, aloof. In mid-evening he went to the bar and bought a bottle of cognac. He thrust it, seal unbroken, into the pocket of his blouse, and stalked out, alone.

"Bad, when a man goes off by himself to drink," Ballard said to Captain Brinley, his table mate. "Does he do that often—lug stuff home with him—I mean?"

Brinley shrugged. "Too often. I've got to hand it to him, though. He sure can hold his liquor."

"Yeah," Ballard agreed. He lingered a few minutes, then slipped out quietly and got on the motorcycle he'd borrowed. His face was grim as he twisted the throttle full open and roared over the rutty three miles toward the drome of the 61st.

Was it imagination, or had he seen a secret flicker of understanding pass between Lockhart and the French bartender when that bottle of cognac slid across the wood.

There was a light in Lockhart's hutment, but the shade was drawn closely across the small window. Ballard slipped close, discovered a slit at one side of the curtain, and stood there breathlessly, watching.

Lockhart sat on his bunk, smoking, eyes sullenly on the floor. After a few minutes he got up, stood listening. Not a sound broke the silence of the almost deserted hutments. Lockhart stepped to the table, took out his pocket knife, and began carefully to extract the cork of the filled cognac bottle. When he got it out, he put it in his pocket, poured himself a drink—and replaced the original cork with another!

Ballard's breath hissed between his teeth and his eyes froze. So that was it! The French tavern keeper's shipments of liquor, coming from heaven knew where, contained certain marked bottles. And the corks were the means of communication!

The Intelligence man watched as Lockhart took from another pocket a cylinder of some gray substance that looked like pasteboard. From this he drew another, smaller metal cylinder about the size of a shotgun cartridge, and into that he slipped the first cork. Then he put the steel capsule back into the larger one, and capped it. Returning the device to his pocket, he picked up his drink, and tossed it off nervously.

Ballard felt numb and stricken. But he shook off the feeling and went quickly to his own hutment, where he got his automatic and put it in his blouse pocket. Then, his hand on the door, he thought better of it and turned back.

"I don't know yet how he gets the stuff across the lines," he thought. "There may be others in it, too, and if I arrest him now I'll never learn who they are. It'll keep—until tomorrow."

And so he went, instead, to the Operations office and reported his information to the major. The astounded C. O. agreed to assign a trusted man to keep an eye on the hutments, and to report at once any officer leaving the place during the night.

"I don't think he'll make a move tonight," Ballard said, "but we can't take

a chance on that. What's his patrol for tomorrow?"

"Noon."

Ballard nodded, his eyes like flint. "We'll be on hand." And then, wearily, "It's hard to believe, Major. My one-time friend."

"I know," the C. O. said harshly. "But don't waste any sympathy on a rat like that, Ballard. A man who will sell out his country—The firing squad's too good for him!"

"I know it. And yet—Well, good night, Major. Tomorrow will tell the story."

Ballard slept little that night. He had stopped a leak that might have cost the success of the Allied drive, and he had certainly saved the lives of thousands of American doughboys by so doing. But his mind kept going back to Leslie Lockhart as he had been, years before. Wild and reckless and hot-headed, yes—but lovable, for all of that.

Lockhart had gone to the devil, he had sold out to Satan. He had become that most despised of all creatures on earth—a traitor. He deserved, and would get, the firing squad. But it was bitter knowledge to Curt Ballard that he was the man to send him there.

When Lockhart's sullen, defiant gray eyes looked into the muzzles of the rifles, and those rifles spoke in the dawn, Curt Ballard would be seeing Les's eyes with laughter in them, and warm friendliness, and the love of life. The thought held him sleepless, tossing on his bunk and staring into the dark, and he was glad when the day came at last.

THE sun climbed the sky, and noon drew near. The five ships of Lockhart's "B" Flight were wheeled onto the line, and their motors started. They stood, warming, the rumble of the Hissos rolling across the tarmac.

Ballard, keyed up with strain, moved

about in pretended unconcern, watching every slightest move that Lockhart made. The flight leader talked with his men, walked along the line inspecting the ships. The eyes of the secret agent never left him.

Alone for a moment, Lockhart paused beside a new Spad which was to be taken out by a replacement named Sutton. The flight leader's movement was so swift and sure that a casual observer would have noticed nothing out of the way. But Ballard saw. Lockhart had taken something from his pocket, thrust it under the seat cushion, in the cockpit of Sutton's ship. Then he moved away, nonchalantly lighting a cigarette.

Sure of what he had seen, Ballard wanted to verify it beyond doubt. He strolled to Sutton's ship, and, with Lockhart farther down the line, felt under the seat cushion—and found the telltale cylinder. Dropping it in his pocket, he looked up to see Lockhart's eyes upon him.

Lockhart was standing beside his own ship, in the middle of the line. For a moment his face was a mask of such hatred as Ballard had never seen on a human countenance. His lips drew back in a snarl, and his eyes were the eyes of a trapped tiger.

Only for a clock tick they stood thus, facing each other across the cockpits of the intervening ships. Then Lockhart moved with flashing swiftness, vaulted into his ship and revved the motor to a roaring crescendo.

Ballard's hand darted to his belt, came up with Colt leveled. The bellow of Lockhart's motor drowned his shouted "Halt!" and Lockhart, crouched low in his cockpit, was a bad target, with the danger of hitting others near him.

The secret agent dashed around the nose of Sutton's ship, yelling "Stop that man!" But his words were lost in the clamor of motors, and Lockhart had rocked the ship over the chock blocks be-

fore the stunned mechanics and pilots could make a move to stop him. The Spad tore across the field, and Ballard's swift shots went wide of the fleeing target.

The speeding ship lifted, dust clinging like thin smoke to its spinning wheels, and zoomed swiftly. Ballard flung himself into the nearest cockpit, yelled to a dazed mech to jerk the chocks, and gestured the others to follow. Then he gunned in pursuit.

The three remaining ships got into the air in a matter of seconds and followed Ballard, who was warming his Vickers guns as he jockeyed his speeding crate.

But Lockhart had a hopped-up ship, and too much start. He could get more speed out of a Spad than anyone else on the field, anyway, and Ballard's desperate work with throttle and controls could not shorten the gap to shooting distance.

Over the lines they went, high and fast, Lockhart away up front, and Ballard's three companions bringing up the rear. And when a flight of black-winged ships spotted them and whipped around to take a hand, Ballard cursed hopelessly and turned back. As his ship swung, he had a glimpse of Lockhart raising a gloved hand in derisive gesture.

Back on the field again, a dazed group of pilots and mechanics stood around Ballard and stared at the object he held in his hand.

"Sutton was to carry this thing to German Intelligence," he said quietly.

The boy's face went white as chalk. "I, sir?"

"Without your own knowledge, son. The flight was to be led into a Hun ambush, where Lockhart would point you out as today's message carrier. Then you'd have been gunned down, and the message container dug out of the wreck. It's asbestos-covered—in case the ship burned."

"I thought it was mighty strange," Anderson growled. "Lockhart leading us into

so many bad spots. Something was lousy."

"One fledgling in each flight was marked for slaughter," Ballard nodded grimly, and Sutton swallowed hard and drew a shaking hand across his mouth.

Ballard turned to the major. "Sorry he got away, sir, but—"

"Forget it," Redding said. "You've blocked the spy channel, and that's all that matters. Come on to the office with me, and I'll inform GHQ."

"I wish we'd stopped him," Ballard said as they walked toward the office. "Not that I'd have enjoyed sending him to his death, but he may be dangerous on the other side."

"How?"

"He'll probably find a way. He's smart, he knows the whole setup in this sector, and he'll want revenge."

"On you, perhaps."

"I'll risk that," Ballard said calmly. "Cigarette, Major?"

CHAPTER FOUR

The Long Road to Hell

BUT the days lengthened into weeks, the bright warmth of summer gave place to the rain-lashed chill of early fall, and nothing had been heard of Leslie Lockhart.

And then Ballard got an assignment to cross into enemy territory and pick up information far behind the German lines. Dressed as a French peasant, he left Chaumont after dark, and gunned his fast pursuit ship northeast. He was to land in a designated clearing, and to proceed through the woods to a hut on the other side, where an American spy would be waiting for him. The spy had the information, and would relay it to Ballard, to be carried back to the American side.

"We can't risk having him meet you at the clearing," the colonel had told him. "Because if you are spotted, they'd grab him, too, and his information is too

damned valuable to lose. And get your stuff by word-of-mouth, so that if they do catch you there'll be nothing on you that might be traced to him."

So here was Curt Ballard, speeding through the clear, starlit night at the plane's absolute ceiling, and wondering if he could get down without cracking up. He knew the territory, and could locate the spot all right by the winding little river nearby that would reflect the light of the brilliant stars.

But these deadstick landings were none too easy, even on a familiar field, in daylight. And on a strange field, at night, there were all the ingredients for a first class smash. And if you used your motor to save yourself, you might almost as well send up a flare to announce your arrival. The sound of a Hiss carried a long way.

He made it, though. Planed down in wide spirals, and set her on the turf with nothing worse than a bad shaking-up. The ship rolled to a stop near the belt of woods, and Ballard sat tense in his cockpit for long seconds, listening. There wasn't a sound except the brief flutter of a disturbed bird in a nearby tree.

The young secret agent smiled as he stripped off goggles and helmet and donned the flat cap of a peasant to go with the rest of his baggy clothing. He got out of the ship, hauled her into the deep shadow of the trees, in position for a fast getaway. Then he slipped into the woods, picked up the narrow trail, and hastened on his mission.

The spy was waiting at the hut. Ballard identified himself by three knocks, two, and then three again, and was admitted to the darkened interior. By the glow of a pocket flash, carefully shaded to show no light outside, the spy spread a map on the stone-paved floor of the kitchen, and the two men crouched over it.

"They're massing a drive—here—and here." The spy spoke swiftly, in low, urgent tones. "Heavy concentrations, with

ample reserve units to follow through. Reserves based here and here.

"Heavy batteries up close"—he pointed them out—"to range on our back roads and cut off reinforcements. Camouflaged ammunition and supply dumps here, and here. You'd better advise corps artillery to range on them, and do it quickly."

He went on swiftly, his shoulder pressing tensely against Ballard's as the two crouched in the dark. Most men could not have hoped to remember that flood of information, but Ballard's keen mind took it all in, and asked for more.

"*Bon chance, mon ami!*" the spy whispered as the secret agent was leaving. "Good luck!"

"And to you, old man!" Ballard gripped the blue-shirted shoulder strongly. "You have done a grand job!"

In the woods again, Ballard grinned exultantly as he headed once more along the dark, narrow trail. "A grand job!" he told himself. "We'll stop the Hun drive in its tracks, and no mistake!"

Nearing the plane, he advanced cautiously, every sense alert. He saw nothing, heard nothing. And he was beside the ship, his arms lifting to swing the prop for compression, when the voice behind him commanded,

"Halt!"

THERE was no argument. Couldn't be. A dozen men, rising out of nowhere, ringed him with leveled guns. His hands, letting go of the prop blade, remained in the air, and he stood quietly as those steady gun muzzles moved in on him.

Ten minutes later, after a ride over rutted roads, the open car bearing the Yank secret agent rolled onto the drome of a German flying squadron, and stopped before a lighted building.

The four Germans in the car with Ballard piled out, herding the prisoner before them. One of them, an officer, had his Luger jammed in the small of the

prisoner's back as they walked to the door. A knock, a blunt "Come in," in German, and they entered.

And then Ballard stopped dead in his tracks, his body stiffening so suddenly that the Luger rammed harder into his spine and the officer guard rasped "Careful, Yankee!"

There were two men in the Operations office. The burly, red-faced man behind the desk was obviously the Baron von Breck. The other, in the uniform of a German flying captain, was Leslie Lockhart.

There was no sign of recognition on Lockhart's face. The shaded oil lamp on the desk left most of the room in dimness. Ballard's cap, pulled low, shadowed his eyes, and his fake mustache—the straggly, untidy affair of a French peasant, hid his mouth.

Ballard's captors shoved him forward to stand before the desk, and still Lockhart sat with a cool half-smile on his face. He had one knee crossed over the other, and his polished boots glinted in the light as he regarded the prisoner.

The baron leaned comfortably back in his chair, his gimlet eyes bright with satisfaction. "So it worked," he growled.

"We caught him in the act of escaping, *Herr Major*," snapped the officer guard. "There is no doubt—"

"Doubt? Certainly not. Yankee, you should know that Hissos, even at ten thousand feet, can be heard far away on a quiet night. "You should—" And then he noticed something, and his eyes narrowed fiercely. "Take off your cap in the presence of your superiors, *schweinhund!*"

Ballard's mouth tightened, and he stood unmoving. The officer guard snarled, and snatched at the offending headgear, throwing it on the floor.

Lockhart sat up with a jerk, his knee uncrossing and his heel hitting the boards, hard. He stared. Then he got to his feet, reached Ballard in two strides, and ripped

off the false mustache with painful abruptness.

Instantly the resemblance between the two men stood out, and the others in the room gasped. The major gave a startled exclamation, but neither man heard it. Jaw to jaw, they were glaring at each other, Ballard's eyes scornful and defiant, a slow look of gloating spreading over the face of Leslie Lockhart.

"You!" Lockhart let the word out softly, on a deep breath.

"Me," Ballard said quietly, his eyes steady on the other.

"So we meet again, Ballard." Lockhart drawled the words quietly, but in the silent room they vibrated with savage menace.

"Not of my choosing," Ballard retorted. "I always did hate the smell of skunk."

LOCKHART laughed, and with slow deliberation got out a cigarette. He puffed it alight over the chimney of the oil lamp, and sat down, blowing smoke with satisfaction. "We have made a better catch than I dared hope, Major," he said, in German.

The C. O., plainly bewildered, blinked his gimlet eyes. "This man. I do not understand. He is your twin brother, perhaps?"

"*Gott im Himmel, nein!*" Lockhart's German was as good as the major's, as good as Ballard's. "But I know him—too well. He is Curt Ballard, of American G-2. Does the name mean anything to you?"

"Ballard!" The pale blue eyes were suddenly as venomous as a rattler's. "Ballard! The man who broke up our communications through the American 61st Squadron?"

"The same."

The baron's lips widened in a tight grin, and he spoke through his teeth. "This is delightful." And then, to the guards, "Search him!"

Lockhart shrugged. "You won't find anything. He's too smart for that."

Rough hands went over the prisoner, probing everywhere, ripping the seams of his worn clothing, even the soles of his shoes. They found nothing.

The officer guard straightened, spread his hands. "Nothing, *Herr* Major."

The baron grimaced. "It does not matter. He will talk—when the time comes."

Lockhart snorted. "You can forget that, Major. He's no fool. Sure, he'll talk. But you'll only be wasting your time. He'll tangle you up in a snarl of clever lies like a kitten in a ball of yarn. I know him, I tell you."

The major shrugged resignedly. "I suppose you are right. Well, his guilt as a spy is clear, and the penalty is prescribed in regulations." He turned to Ballard. "Have you anything to say for yourself?"

"Only this." Ballard rested his finger tips on the desk edge, and his gray eyes bored into Lockhart's. "A *spy* dies honorably. But the rotten soul of a *traitor* stinks to the farthest corner of hell!"

Lockhart sneered, but in spite of himself his eyes winced slightly, and he paled a little.

The baron's lips quirked in an evil grin. "After that remark, Captain Lockhart, it should be a pleasure for you to command the firing squad—at dawn. Eh?"

"I should like nothing better!" Lockhart snapped.

The C. O. nodded. "You will do so, then. My orders." And, to the guards, "Take him away."

CHAPTER FIVE

Wings of the Damned

BALLARD'S cell was one of four which opened on a narrow corridor. He was the only prisoner, but he soon discovered that he could do nothing with

the hard-faced guard who paced the corridor. The man was beyond argument or bribe, he refused to come within reaching distance of the cell door, and he watched the prisoner like a cat. It looked hopeless.

The prisoner prowled his cell desperately. To die was not so bad. That was a chance you took when you went to war. But he had information of vital importance to the Allied armies, and it was imperative that GHQ have it at once. He walked up and down, across and across the narrow space, thinking not of the firing squad at dawn, but of his own failure in this matter.

The hours dragged by, and he had no way of knowing the time. Through the high barred window he saw the stars blotted out by a thrust of clouds. Then rain began to drum heavily on the sheet-iron roof. Not a thunderstorm, but a stubborn, continuing downpour. Monotonously the feet of the guard paced the corridor.

And then the rattle of the outer door of the guardhouse, and Ballard braced himself, thinking "This is it. This is the business."

Footsteps came along the corridor, and the guard snapped to attention. The visitor stopped outside the cell door, and Ballard's teeth clicked defiantly as he saw that it was Lockhart. He wore a visored garrison cap, pulled low over his eyes, and a black slicker which gleamed wet in the light of the flickering overhead lamp in the corridor.

Lockhart spoke bluntly to the guard. "Leave me alone with this prisoner. I have questions to put to him which are not for your ears. When I have finished, I shall send for you."

"*Jawohl!*"

"Your keys."

"*Jawohl!*" The key ring changed hands, the guard clicked heels and marched out. Lockhart turned, and the two men faced

each other through the bars. Only the sound of the rain on the sheet-iron roof broke the silence that held them. Then Ballard spoke harshly:

"I thought you knew better than to question me, Lockhart."

"I do know better, Curt."

Curt! The use of his first name, some quality of tension in the tones of the man outside the cell door, caught Ballard's attention. He frowned, then his eyes narrowed watchfully. "You can omit the soft soap, too," he added shortly.

Lockhart shook his head, glanced at his wrist watch. "I'll come right to the point," he said. "I'm giving you a chance to escape."

Ballard gasped. Then, standing braced, arms folded across his chest, he laughed scornfully. "Escape! You?"

"I know," Lockhart nodded. "It is rather hard to believe—from a man who's done the things I have." His hand moved down the front of the black slicker, unbuckling it. From an inside pocket he took a letter which he thrust through the bars. "This is yours," he said. "Read it—and then maybe you'll understand."

Ballard took the letter, recognized the handwriting as that of Rita, his wife. It had been brought to him as he sat in the cockpit of his plane, on the Chaumont airfield, ready to take off, and he had shoved it down beside the seat cushion for later reading.

The envelope had been ripped open. "So you read it," he snapped.

"I read it—naturally. Never mind that, Curt."

Ballard took the folded sheets from the envelope, and a snapshot came with them. He glanced at it, then held it between his fingers while his eyes eagerly scanned the well-loved handwriting.

The first part of the letter was merely chatty, cheerful news of the homeland. Then he came to something else, something that rolled back the years.

Curt, I came across this snapshot when I was looking over some old pictures today. I thought you'd like to have it, because it carries memories of happier times—when you and I and Leslie Lockhart were the best friends in the world.

Your last letter, which came yesterday, said that Les is with the Americans in the air, and doing splendidly. I am so glad! Perhaps, if you could see him, the old hatred could be mended. I still wish it might be. Les was a good kid, and—

THE paper crackled sharply in Curt Ballard's hands as his fingers tightened on it. "Why are you showing me this—now?" he demanded. "A nice little refinement of torture for a condemned man?"

"Look at the picture. Do you remember when that was taken?"

Ballard looked at the snapshot more closely. It was a picture of the three of them together, Rita and the two young men. She was in the middle, and each of the boys had an arm around her. All three were laughing. A sharp pang of memory assailed Ballard, but he concealed it.

"Well, what of it?"

Lockhart did not answer at once. Under the visored cap his eyes burned with torture. The water dripped from the black slicker and formed a little pool on the concrete floor. A pool that glistened with a flat sheen, like blood.

"Don't you understand, Curt?" he burst out, finally. "That picture, and the letter—! Damn it, man, I can't go through with this! I thought I could, but I can't."

With the guard's key he unlocked the cell door, entered. His hands on Ballard's arms pleaded for understanding. "Curt, you and I are changing places. You're going back to the American lines with your information. And I—"

"And you're going to face the firing squad in my stead, I suppose." Ballard drew away a step, spoke with scorn and suspicion in his tones. This sort of thing

couldn't happen. There was a trick in it somewhere. But—

"That's it exactly, Curt," Lockhart said quietly. "I know what you're thinking—that I've got something up my sleeve. I haven't. I—"

"A letter, and a picture," Ballard cut in, "and they reduce a hard-boiled killer—and a traitor—to a pulp of sentimentality. You'll have to think up something better than that, Lockhart."

Lockhart's shoulders sagged. "That hurts, old chap. I have been all you say, and more. It was my damnable pride, and my temper that started it. I went to pieces when I lost Rita to you. And I knew I was wrong, but I wouldn't admit it. Don't think I haven't paid for it. I've been in hell for four years, Curt, until my soul is burned black inside me. Well, it doesn't take much sometimes to change a man. A letter—and a picture—and a sudden poignant memory of something clean and fine. Call it religion, call it 'being saved,' Call it what you like, but there it is."

He paused, lifted a hand to remove the visored cap and swish the rain from it. Then he went on:

"It might not have hit me so hard, Curt, if you had told Rita that I was a dirty dog and a traitor. But you didn't. You let her go on thinking that I was once more the sort of guy she remembered. You let her go on thinking—"

"It would only have made her unhappy to know the truth," Ballard said.

"I never supposed it meant that much to her—or to you. My friendship, I mean. You and Rita had each other. I didn't matter."

"I tried to tell you."

"I know. But I was too blind—with pride and the lust for revenge—to understand. Now I do, and—"

"It's all right, Les. Don't say any more about it." Ballard felt his heart beating dully with compassion for this man.

A KILLER, yes, and a traitor. But in this musty, dimly-lighted cell, with blood and war and death all around in the rain-filled dark, a precious, vital spark of manhood had fought out through the bitter ashes of pride and hate and revenge to glow like a beacon in the night.

That spark lighted a road for Curt Ballard. An uncertain road, beset with difficulties and harsh with suffering, but it led around the grim muzzles of the firing squad—to freedom and the accomplishment of his mission. He said quietly,

"What's your plan, Les? I don't quite see—"

"We change clothes, change places. You go. I—stay."

"That's a hard decision, Les."

"It's the only way. If I could let you walk out, in my clothes, and take a ship, I'd do it. But what excuse could you offer the guards at the hangars for going out on a night like this? They'd smell a rat at once. You'd never get off the ground."

"You're asking me to stand by while they—knock you off?"

"Stand by? Hell, fella, you heard the baron's orders to me. I'm to command the squad. And that'll be your job in my place."

"Do you realize what you're asking, Les?"

"Perfectly." Lockhart's hand went out to rough affectionately the shoulder of the man in peasant garb. "Listen, you damn fool, I know the baron, and you don't. Those little eyes of his see everything, and he's got a brain in his head. Try to beg off, to avoid the job, and—well, you're sunk, that's all."

"I can't do it, old man. I—"

"And you accused *me* of being sentimental! Don't you see that this thing is bigger than sentiment? Turn down my plan, refuse to go through with it, and you'll never get back to the American lines. The German drive will go through, and—"

"How much time have we?" Ballard spoke thickly.

Lockhart glanced at his watch. "About fifteen minutes. Without the clouds, you'd see the dawn coming now. Off with those rags, mister, and put on this outfit."

Wordless, Ballard began to strip off the peasant clothes, while Lockhart got out of his slicker and uniform. A few minutes, and each stood in the garb of the other.

"Now listen carefully, Curt," Lockhart said when the change was complete. "You've been around German troops—in Berlin and on your spy jaunts into this country—enough to know about how they do things. But let's go over everything so there won't be any slip."

"Yes, old man." Ballard spoke out of a throat that ached with suffering.

Lockhart talked rapidly for some minutes, explaining the whole procedure. "And keep away from the baron as much as you can, Curt," he finished. "Go to my quarters as soon as the job is done, and stay there until the weather clears. That'll probably be soon after dawn, according to our weather reports tonight. Then you can order out a ship and get away. But watch the baron! All clear?"

"All clear, Les." The black slicker rustled as Ballard lifted his hand to pull the visored cap lower over the agony in his eyes. "All clear."

"Then, so long, fella." The arm in the ragged peasant sleeve was extended, and the fingers of the two men met in a farewell that neither could put into words. "So long, good luck, and—" Lockhart's voice broke slightly "—and give my best—to Rita."

CHAPTER SIX

Rifles in the Dawn

FIVE minutes later, Curt Ballard stood waiting alone in an open area behind one of the hangars. There was a stone

wall there, an old wall which once had marked a farm boundary, but now had a grimmer use.

In the faint light of coming dawn, struggling against the rain-lashed dark, spots showed on that wall. Places where Mauser bullets, slowed but not stopped by human flesh, had spatted against the rock and concrete. Ballard shut his eyes, the pulse beating heavily in his ears.

Another figure, slicker collar high against the drive of the rain, came toward him. The baron. Ballard was glad that a wind had risen, whipping the rain against him, for it gave him an excuse to hold his own collar closely over his face, and to muffle his voice behind the rubber when he spoke.

"A nasty morning, Captain." The baron's eyes gleamed between cap and slicker collar. "But I couldn't miss this—little occasion." He laughed gloatingly.

"A great occasion—for me," Ballard answered.

A great occasion! The murder of a friend who had just fought his way up from the pits of hell!

"Ja, you are right. Something to remember. Ja, Captain!"

"Something—to remember."

"They are coming," the baron said.

"Yes."

The firing squad appeared around the corner of the hangar, marching stiffly. Eight slickered men, in a hollow square, in charge of a sergeant, with the prisoner in the middle.

Lockhart shambled along, his rough peasant clothing plastered against him by the beat of the rain. His cap was pulled low over his eyes, his shoulders sagged, and his chin drooped down on his chest dejectedly.

The baron chortled. "He dies badly—a coward."

Ballard said nothing, but his teeth ground together. He understood what this pig-eyed fellow did not; that Lock-

hart had assumed this beaten and dejected pose the better to conceal his identity.

It was every man's right to die with his chin up, eyes forward. Lockhart was forfeiting that right. Sacrificing the last shreds of his pride to make sure that he himself would die in this dangerous, desperate gamble with the Gods of War.

Standing stiffly erect, silent, the rain hissing against his slicker, Ballard paid mute tribute to that shambling, pitiful, gallant figure.

They led Lockhart to the wall, placed him with his back against it. Still he stood with head bowed, and he seemed to sway on his feet as the sergeant laid a white blindfold over his eyes, drew it scornfully tight at the back of his head.

"You are well away from a nation which breeds such spineless ones," the major sneered, and Ballard's muscles tightened with the urge to crush that lying mouth with a hard fist.

The sergeant barked orders. The firing squad was lined up, and the non-com turned to Ballard, clicked heels, and saluted.

Ballard returned the salute, moved to take his position at the left of the squad. The eight men stood stiffly at attention, rifles grounded, the wind whipping the slickers around their booted legs, the rain beating against their backs.

That same rain struck full upon the man against the wall. The white blindfold hid the upper part of his face, masked any possible suspicion of his identity, and now he was standing straight, scorning the support of the stones behind him. His chin was up defiantly, his shoulders square beneath the rain-sodden blouse.

The baron waited, watching sharply. The eight loaded rifles waited, rigid and alert, while Ballard fought to get his voice past that awful tightness in his throat.

Inside him, his soul was crying out, over and over again. "No! Oh, God, no!"

He had the strange feeling that he must speak very loudly to drown that cry of his soul. Only a moment, and then—

"Ready!" The rifles slapped to the port position, waist high. As in the confused flicker of a cinema when the film breaks, Ballard saw the soldier nearest him chewing his lips, his face swept of color.

"Aim!"

The wet barrels of the Mausers flickered blue in the half light as they lifted, all together, steadied in a level line. It was what happened then that almost broke Ballard's heart and his determination.

As the sharp command, "Aim!" drifted on the wind to the prisoner's ears, Lockhart's teeth showed white in a smile, his arm lifted, and he took a short step forward.

"Fire!"

The bullets met him thus, stepping forward, as Ballard's numb lips forced out that last command, and he fell on his face, the uplifted arm seeming to reach toward Ballard in comradeship and understanding. . . .

A FEW minutes later, Ballard sat alone in Lockhart's room and resolutely forced his mind to the hard facts of his situation. Plenty of things could happen yet to make Lockhart's sacrifice all in vain.

The rain was thinning, and there were signs that it would soon clear in the east. Through the window, Ballard watched tensely as the light grew. The rain stopped. A line of brightness showed along the horizon, and the sun broke through.

The pilots were all at breakfast as Ballard walked through the empty passage to the outer door and hailed a passing mechanic. "Have my ship fueled, warmed, ammunitioned. I am going out."

The mechanic saluted, hastened toward the hangars. Ballard returned inside, to wait. He sat down on Lockhart's bunk,

in the midst of Lockhart's personal belongings, and for a moment the memory of his old friend overwhelmed him. "Les," he groaned, his face in his hands. "Les, old fellow!"

At the window again, he saw the black Albatross wheeled out, the men working around it. The motor roared into life, and the prop blurred in the light of the rising sun.

Ballard waited, drawing tensely on a cigarette. He wondered where the baron was. The burly German had seemed, so far, to suspect nothing. "But he's dangerous," Ballard told himself, "and the sooner I'm out of here, the better."

At the window again, he saw five other ships being moved to the line. The morning patrol. Not Lockhart's, for he had been an unofficial adviser to the baron, not a flight leader.

Mechs swung the props, and the glass of the window quivered with the deep rumble of the motors. Time to go, Ballard decided, before those five motors warmed enough to catch him in the air.

He turned to the door—and stood face to face with the Baron von Breck! The baron had come in noiselessly, closed the door behind him, and now he stood leaning against it, a gun in his hand.

The American stood frozen, staring at the Luger in von Breck's hairy fist. The German spoke first:

"Almost, *Ballard*—but not quite!"

The Yankee's brows lifted in pretended amazement. "Ballard? You joke, *Herr Major*!"

"I do not joke! Your scheme was clever, Ballard, but you forgot one little thing. Only one, but—no, stay right where you are!"

"This is ridiculous, sir," Ballard smiled. "Do you suppose—?"

"Suppose?" The pig eyes glinted, and the muzzle of the Luger held steadily on the American's heart. "I do not suppose. I *know*! Captain Lockhart had a small

scar on his left hand, the mark of a machine gun bullet."

"Well?"

"It rather surprised me, when I looked at the dead 'Ballard,' to observe that he had an identical scar. Perhaps, 'Captain Lockhart,'—" the words gritted in the silence "—you will show me your hand. Careful, as you advance!"

"Certainly!" Ballard took two steps, and in a lightning swift motion snatched up a chair and hurled it.

THE chair and a bullet from von Breck's gun passed in midair. Both missed, and in a flash the Yankee was on his foe, his steely fingers closing on the man's gunhand. A twist, a jerk, and the gun slid across the floor.

They fought, rolling over and over, the American silent, von Breck snarling in his throat. The German was powerful, his weight far greater than Ballard's. The American was on top, then underneath, his stomach cold with dread, not of the outcome, but for fear someone might have heard the shot and the commotion.

But no one came. The pilots were in the messhall, and the blip of motors did very well to muffle the crash and thud of the combat. Like primitive animals they fought, Ballard desperately keeping his face away from the vicious clawing of the German's hooked fingers. If the man marked him visibly, escape would be difficult.

And then, writhing out of a hold that for a moment seemed fatal, Ballard caught the German off balance, and he swung his arm with all the power of his muscular body behind it. The hard edge of his hand thudded on his enemy's neck, below the ear, and with a gurgling groan the burly body melted to the floor.

A jiu jitsu trick, that, paralyzing in its effect, and Ballard blessed his stars for his training in the deadly Japanese art. He snatched up the Luger.

"This is for Lockhart," he muttered between his teeth. "You called him a coward!" He brought the butt of the Luger down with bone-smashing force on the skull of the other, and watched the shiver that ran through the big form of the German.

"Sorry, von Breck," he added under his breath, "but I can't have you running after me, you know. Show my hand, eh? Well, you've seen it, you rat! How do you like my cards?"

He thrust the Luger in the pocket of his tunic, stood a moment to compose his labored breathing and brush the dust from his clothes. His ears were keen for the sound of an alarm, but he heard only the rhythmic beat of the motors. Squaring his shoulders, he walked out.

Slowly, easily, he strolled across the tarmac, lighting a cigarette as he went. The smoke drifted back over his shoulders as he adjusted the leather helmet on his head, the goggles over it.

Various pilots, moving about their crates, nodded shortly to him, unsmiling, and the mechs stared woodenly. Ballard had a sudden understanding of what Lockhart's life must have been like, on this drome. These chaps had no more use for a traitor than had any other decent man. But the fact was a help to Ballard now, for the usual bantering exchange of jokes between flying men might have given him away.

Approaching Lockhart's ship, at the far end of the line, the Yank glanced over his shoulder and saw a pilot come barging from the hutments. He was running, shouting, and a Luger glinted in his fist.

Ballard raced for his ship, flung himself into the cockpit, slapped the throttle. The motor howled, and the idling prop became a silver disc. Guns jumped instantly into the hands of men near him, flashed and crashed. A bullet burned like a hot iron across the skin of his shoulder muscles, another nicked his chin as the Albatross



jumped the chock blocks and sped away.

Motors revved to a screaming crescendo behind him, their harsh drumbeat punctuated by the vicious rattle of shots. Slugs keened, whistled, sang past his ears, snapped dryly through the wing fabric.

AND then the wheels lifted, dripping mud, and the clamor fell behind. Ballard wiped blood from his chin with the back of his hand and snapped the hand overside, spattering the fuselage with red. Grimly he looked back, saw the other ships taking off, and leaned to his controls. He knew they couldn't catch him. But the drome would phone ahead, and someone else might.

Someone tried. A flight of Fokkers, hastily rolled out and sketchily warmed, struggled into the air about three miles behind the lines, but couldn't make the altitude in time. Ballard leapfrogged them and went on.

Another flight, earlier up and uninformed of his identity, paid no attention to him as he sped by. He thumbed his nose at them when he was safely past, and they pursued. But briefly, for they ran into a savage hail of American anti-aircraft.

Ballard was in it, too, but it didn't bother him. He was staring at a flight of gray wings, over on the American side, wishing that he had some way to identify himself to those lads. A black German Albatross, roaring into American terri-

tory! They might shoot him down first, and ask questions afterward.

He cut sharply left, hoping to slip past them, but they had seen him and they veered to cut him off. Yellow flame flickered on the noses of the gray ships as they warmed their Vickers guns.

Ballard waved wildly to them. Closer, he saw they were from the 61st. A number on a fuselage told him that this was Captain Brinley's fight. And Brinley wasn't letting any Albatrosses past today. But neither was he ganging on a lone ship. The Yank leader was motioning with a stiff thumb, and the Spads were ranging into position around the German crate.

That suited Ballard. A few minutes delay in getting to Chaumont wouldn't matter, anyway. He signaled surrender, and the six ships winged toward the drome of the 61st.

They landed, taxied to the deadline. Ballard leaned back in his cockpit, and lifted his goggles. Brinley, legging out of his own pit, stared and then swore fiercely.

"Lockhart, eh? So it's you, is it, you damned—I!"

"Ballard—G-2," the secret agent said wearily. The blood was running down his chin, and he felt very tired. "Take me to the major."

A few minutes later he was again in the air, in a Spad, leaving the amazed and delighted Major Redding to phone GHQ of his coming. The bullet burn on his back, the gash on his chin, throbbed painfully, but it was the ache in his heart that hurt most.

Kneeing the stick, he took a letter from his pocket, and out of it a picture. It was a picture of two young men and a girl. The girl was in the middle, and each of the boys had an arm around her. All three were laughing.

AIR ANGLES

By Dusty Dowst

EVERY now and then I hear some guy say, "I'd take up flying, only I don't think I could pass the physical requirements." That always bothers me.

Invariably I ask, "What's the matter with you?" Never yet have I noticed any outward manifestations of physical debility in these birds, except perhaps a pair of glasses, a cauliflower ear or a fanny that's shaped like a satchel. None of these are serious handicaps.

The answers I receive are wide and varied: "I have to wear glasses." "I have flat feet." "I get gas pains early in the morning." "My tonsils and adenoids should have been yanked years ago." And so forth.

My retorts don't vary much. Considering the above-mentioned gripes in order, my remarks must have been something like these: "You can read a telephone book without a magnifying glass, can't you—and you aren't color-blind?" "You don't have to have pretty arches to kick right and left rudder. Jimmy Doolittle flew with two broken legs." "My cat has electricity in his tail. . . ." "If you don't have chronic ailments from your tonsils, forget 'em. Let the Department of Commerce medico tell you whether they'll stop you from getting a student permit. Chances are they won't."

Chums, all this stuff causes me great sadness. It only goes to show that plenty of fellows are missing a whale of a lot of fun just because of ignorance. Before going further, however, I should add that what I've said applies mostly to guys old enough to have been working for a living for a few years; fellows who didn't get the flying bug when they were kids. *Not* the boys of today who have much more desire to fly than we did when I was a little whippersnapper. Nowadays, when a

kid has a growing yen to be a pilot, it amounts to a consuming passion. He figures there's nothing in the world to stop him. And I hope to heck he's right!

If this bugaboo about the physical inability to fly could be overcome, there would be hundreds more willing addicts learning to sprout their wings. And that would be very fine—for several reasons. It would give private flying a boost in general, which means that more clubs would be formed; more pilots would be required for instructing; more equipment—aside from airplanes—would be needed, and that would give a shot in the arm to manufacturing. And more mechanics, welders, riggers and test pilots would be in demand—to absorb many of the newcomers, as well as you lugs for whom flying is as yet only a dream. Now, there you have a nice healthy cycle. All we need do is get the old ball rolling.

Of course, the physical standards for becoming a U. S. Army or Navy pursuit pilot are stiffer than a ninety mile tailwind and twice as hard to pass. That seems to be what has the civilians scared—and I don't wonder. I underwent the old army "609" test myself, in 1929, and it was a bear! I got by with the grace of de Lawd, but I had to wait so long to be called to Brooks Field that I learned to fly with Curtiss-Wright in the meantime. When I stood for Commercial Pilots' physical checkups I saw what a difference there was, but even then, I had an idea that you had to be one hundred percent perfect for an airline pilot's rating. And then, one day, I stood on the tarmac at Newark Airport and watched both pilot and co-pilot climb into one of United's Boeing 247-D's—wearing glasses!

When you stop to consider it, why not? They fly behind a windshield adequately air tight. Of course, their vision must

have been 20-20 or better (each eye), corrective lenses included. Yet what about Wiley Post, one of the most famous fliers of all time? He had but one eye; so did Jimmy Wedell, creator of the Wedell Special, for a time holder of world's speed records. The disadvantage of one-eyed vision is loss of depth perception, which is the ability to determine how far one object is behind another. Close one eye and glance at some unfamiliar scene and try to determine the distance between trees, houses, or something arranged in a line going away from you. You will notice that everything seems to be more or less in the same plane, perpendicular to the line of your vision. Imagine trying to land a fast moving airplane with one eye! Without your altimeter, you'd have a heck of a time even judging altitude! How Wedell and Post and a few other one-eyed pilots ever overcame this handicap is beyond me. Yet they did.

I HEARD about a gent somewhere in South Carolina or Georgia who flies for a hobby, minus three out of four extremities! One arm is missing somewhere around the elbow; one foot is lacking below the ankle, and the other leg terminates just blow the knee! Pallies, you have to take your hat off to this gink. He got the itch to waggle wings along with the buzzards that soar ceaselessly in southern skies, and it seems that no amount of handicap could stop him. As you would suppose, this man employs a few extra mechanical devices to enable him to handle the rudder pedals and throttle—things he designed himself. He can execute any of the normal flight maneuvers and is, indeed, a sound, competent aviator. Did anybody say anything about *flat feet*?

Major Seversky, a comparative newcomer to the field of military aviation in America, has an artificial leg. His success is little short of phenomenal, both as a designer and manufacturer, and as a

pilot. The major lost his shank during the World War. First time I ever saw him was at Bridgeport Airport, in Stratford, Connecticut. He arrived in one of the sweetest jobs of the day: a Pitcairn Sport Mailwing. Do any of you lugs remember the Pitcairns? The Mailwings were retired by Eastern Air Lines in 1935, the last one being named the Pony Express of the Air; it terminated the day of non-passenger-carrying mail and cargo aircraft of the transport lines. No longer do pilots sit alone in single-place ships, boring holes in the night with three or four hundred horsepower and a load of mail. It's all big stuff, now. Some of the fellows miss those days, when you didn't have to wear a uniform with a lot of brass buttons, and nobody told you when to fly or when not to. You simply put on your old dirty leather windbreaker, with a sweater or two, maybe, then crawled into a chute and shoved off.

Well, as I was saying, Major Seversky dodged the holes at Bridgeport Airport, rolled up to the administration building and extricated himself from the cockpit. At that time his phony leg seemed to be rigid, but it didn't hamper him any. This year I saw him at the National Air Races, and I'd have defied anyone to guess that he didn't have ten warm toes. Incidentally, during the course of the meet, two Seversky jobs acquitted themselves nobly: Jacqueline Cochran and Frank Fuller. They took first and second places, respectively, in the Bendix Trophy competition. First time a woman ever won such a grueling race.

There's another lad I know about who, I think, deserves mention along with pilots who have overcome physical handicaps. We'll call him Joe. His trouble was that one leg was just a little shorter than the other. However, he was pretty sound otherwise, and the examining M. D. passed him, issued his student permit. Pretty soon Joe was doing nice work with

his instructor, and the short leg wasn't bothering him at all. As far as the instructor was concerned, Joe was the next thing to a natural, and in a reasonable length of time, he turned Joe loose for his solo flight. Nothing to it. Before long Joe was piling up time (the current requirement was fifty hours) for a private license.

At last Joe had fifty hours. Both he and his instructor were certain he could knock that private pilot's examination into a cocked hat, and Joe, a good student, was all primed for the written test. He could recite the Air Commerce Regulations and the Air Traffic Rules backward and forward. Fifty hours is quite a long time, and Joe was smart enough to use a good deal of it to good purpose—practicing the maneuvers required for the flight test, instead of flying aimlessly around the country simply putting in time.

Well, Joe got his logbook certified, made an appointment for his written exam. It didn't seem very hard to him, but that was because he knew his stuff. Then he waited anxiously a full week to learn the outcome. When he was notified that he had earned the highest mark in a group of sixteen, he was plenty tickled, and all the more confident about his flying a sweet test.

The big day came; Joe, because of his mark in the written, was the first candidate the inspector took. The latter was a calm, quiet little duck who didn't scare Joe a bit. They walked out to the Fleet that was warming up on the line, and of course Joe was limping; not very bad, but enough to notice.

The inspector said, "Did you hurt your leg?"

"No," answered Joe. "I always limp a bit, since birth. But the flight surgeon didn't see why it should interfere with my flying."

"I see," said the inspector. Joe immediately felt on the defensive, as if the department man doubted Joe's ability.

They taxied out to one of the central runway intersections, where the inspector climbed from the airplane, specifying the area Joe must shoot for in his spot landings.

"All right, son," he said. "Go up there and do a couple of spins, each way. Do two-and-a-half to the right, and two to the left. Don't get so far away that I'll get blind looking for you. Then come back here at 1500 feet and do a 360. Consider the edge of this runway as a wide ditch, which means that if you undershoot, you've cracked up. When you land, come to a full stop and watch me for a signal to shove off again or talk to me. . . . Go ahead."

THE only time Joe was ever more thrilled was the day he first soloed. Here was the old business; if he got a good score he'd get his license, and then he could take pals for a ride. He taxied to the west end of the field, faced into the wind less forty-five degrees, then looked over his shoulder. (A method employed by cautious pilots to determine whether or not any one is coming in to land behind you, or taking off ahead of you.) All clear. He gave the gun a burst, straightened out, opened her up and started to roll.

I might add right here that this is an account of a perfectly authentic private pilot's flight test; each maneuver is correct. . . .

Joe climbed to 3500 feet, and at a point not too far to the east of the field, he stuck his nose up wind, picked a landmark ahead, and another directly behind. This was to be two-and-a-half to the right. He eased the stick back, went into a power stall, and just as she began to quiver he cut the gun, horsed the stick all the way back and kicked full right rudder. She fell into the spin neatly, effortlessly, gaining speed as she commenced to wind up. Joe watched his landmarks gyrate swiftly

past his vision, made a careful, quick estimate. Allowing almost a full half turn, he shoved the stick forward, neutralized the rudder. The Fleet spun more slowly, then came out in a straight dive right on the mark. Joe laughed loudly, hollering, "Right on the snoot! Right on the snoot!" He opened the throttle and climbed for his next one, which turned out just as good.

All set for a 360. There are 360 degrees in a circle, right? That's where this maneuver gets its name. You come in over the field flying up wind, cut the gun over the exact spot upon which you hope to touch your wheels and tailskid in a three point landing.

Joe looked down and saw the inspector standing there, a tiny bug—but such an important one. He cut the gun, dropped his nose immediately, banking rather sharply to his left. He leveled out in a normal glide flying at approximately forty-five degrees from the path upon which he approached the field. Now he must estimate the wind, his air speed, and the amount of altitude he is losing. Beyond the leeward border he makes another left turn, nose well down; and he blasts the throttle for a short burst every fifteen seconds. His last turn should be about ninety degrees, also to the left, of course, and now he is heading straight for the spot. Joe didn't forget what the inspector had said about that "ditch."

He played it slightly on the safe side, by coming in a trifle high. You are allowed to slip just a bit, or fishtail. But there's no way to stretch a glide if you're *short*. You're not allowed to cheat with the throttle . . . Now Joe knew it was in the bag. He eased back on the stick, let her sit down—on three points. He cleared the "line" by only a few feet. Perfect.

He rolled to a stop and the inspector walked over to him. "Go back up there and execute some 720's, each way. Then come over the field at 2000 feet and spiral down to the spot."

Joe took off again. At three thousand feet he did a 720 to the right; then to the left. A 720 consists of two vertical banks in succession, coming out exactly on the mark you were headed for when you went into it. The trick is *not* to lose altitude. And even though you're 3000 feet when you start, the inspector has an uncanny ability to guess how far you drop, even to tens of feet! At the end of both maneuvers Joe's altimeter showed exactly 3000! He came back over the field at 2000, heading up wind. Over the "spot" he cut the gun, made three medium-tight turns to the left to spiral down and hit the mark as neatly as he had with his 360.

The inspector came over, put one foot on the cat-walk. "Go up and execute a 180. If it's any good, I'll ride with you."

A 180, as it implies, is half a circle. You fly over the field at 1000 feet *down* wind, cut the gun directly above your "spot", then fly a gliding triangle somewhat similar to the pattern of a 360. The principal difference is that the first turn is an obtuse angle to the right, instead of an acute angle to the left.

Well, the inspector couldn't kick about Joe's 180, nor anything he had thus far done. He got into the front cockpit, signalled for Joe to pour the soup to her, and off they went. The department man asked for gentle eights, and he got gentle eights. Joe picked up about forty feet at one point, which he shouldn't have done. The inspector called his attention to it and Joe promptly lost it.

Then the inspector took over. Presently they were cruising along somewhat north of the field, at about four thousand feet, headed west. Suddenly Joe felt the throttle yanked shut, heard the inspector yell, "Okay! Set her on the spot."

The inspector kept his eyes to the front, his hands in sight on the cockpit combing. Joe said silently, "You've never seen a sweeter spot-landing than the one com-

ing up right now!" He glanced over at the sock, was surprised to see it hanging limp. Nuts! That meant he couldn't count on the wind to hold him back; he'd have to do some tall slipping to get on the ground where he wanted to. He dropped the right wing, eased the stick back just a mite, and stepped on the right rudder pedal plenty hard. That Fleet slipped like a plummet.

In fact, it was more than the inspector could take. He hollered and grabbed the stick; but Joe had already righted it, was holding it off the ground, killing the speed with a gentle fishtail, until the wheels and tailskid kissed the earth barely clear of the "ditch." Joe felt very warm and pleasant inside, now. The old boy had tried to fox him, but Joe was too good, too hot. It was in the bag. . . .

The inspector still sat there.

Joe unfastened his belt, jacked himself up out of the seat, resting on the turtle-back. "You want me to do something else, sir?" he asked respectfully and a little alarmed.

The inspector seemed to come out of a coma. "What? Oh, no. That'll be enough for today."

He hoisted himself out onto the catwalk, stepped down to the dirt. Joe got down, too. "Son," the inspector went on, "I can't quite give it to you—"

Joe's heart dropped clean out of him. "Why—why—" he stammered. "Wh-what did I miff?"

The department man put on a very wise, yet slightly embarrassed look. "Your rudder work, in the eights. A little sloppy—indecisive. And that rough slip you pulled just now. You see—"

"Yeah," said Joe dismally, "I see. It's my leg. You don't think I should fly with it."

"Oh, no, son! I didn't say anything like that. I just think that ninety days more would smooth you out a bit. Then you come up again, kid, and we'll see."

Joe's instructor was mad as hell. He felt like killing the inspector, but it wouldn't do any good to show his anger.

A lot of fellows would have quit—but not Joe. He worked along in his careful, dogged way, day after day. He tried that closed-throttle forced landing from every conceivable point around the field. And he never missed. In ninety days he went up again.

And the same thing happened—with a different inspector. It happened twice more, so help me. Of necessity Joe became one of the most competent precision pilots in the country. That short leg seemed to have the inspectors stymied psychologically. The last time Joe went up he flew, as usual, a beautiful test. Before coming down he throttled the engine and yelled, "Inspector, you can bust me if you want—the other guys did. But I know there's not a damned thing wrong with my flying—and so do you. All I'm asking you to do is sit there and ride with me for ten minutes. How about it?"

The department representative didn't say yes—and he didn't say no. So Joe let him have it. He slow rolled, snap rolled; he pulled off a beautiful chandelle, a couple of immelman's and some wing-overs that would make an army pursuit pilot writhe with envy. When he was all done he took a good look at the "spot" and turned off the switch.

The inspector turned around and did some swearing, but Joe paid no heed. He executed a dead-stick landing like a butterfly lighting on a rose—and the inspector turned around and grasped his hand. . . .

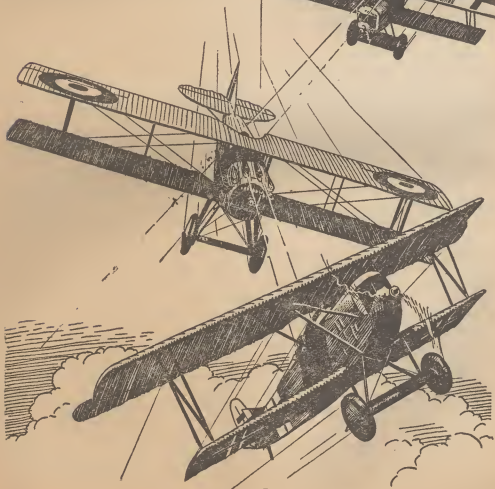
Joe had sort of a tough time of it; that's not only an extreme, but highly unusual case. And if Joe could overcome a handicap as great as his was—what the hell's holding you guys! Couldn't you scrape together four bucks once a week (or even once in two weeks) to pay for a good, long half-hour's instruction? Try it. You'll find you can!

Death has a Price

by O. B. MYERS

An eagle's wings are as strong as his courage, and Hell waits patiently for the weak! Matty Kirk discovered that glory comes cheap, and that even Death has a price!

WHEN Matty Kirk first saw the V-shaped cluster of Pfalz scouts, they were between him and the lines, several thousand feet higher than he, and had the sun and wind at their back. They saw him as soon as he saw



them—but Matty began to maneuver. Precisely four minutes later Matty and his companion Spads were diving out of the sun onto the Pfalz formation from above at just the flanking angle that would force the Boches to do one of three things; turn under the guns of the Spads, break up the patrol into a dogfight, or flee precipitately in a shameless dive.

Such was Matty Kirk's maneuvering. Partly skill, partly swift reaction between eye and brain and hand, and partly plain nerve; it all went to make up a sense of air strategy that was extraordinary. He had it, and he knew he had it; others knew it, too. But he couldn't have told you how he acquired it, any more than he could teach it to someone else. Not by instruction in any school, either on the ground or in the air, certainly. He had learned it by long and bitter experience in the skies of the Western front; two wound stripes and several scars attested to the fact that he had not always been letter-perfect in his lessons. But what he once learned he never forgot.

After such adroit preparatory handiwork, the scrap that followed was almost anti-climax. There were six Pfalz, and only four of the Spads, but the Germans, finding themselves so smartly outfoxed before it started, seemed disheartened in advance. The leader started a turn, saw his danger, and changed his mind. As he whipped over into a dive, Matty plunged down upon him.

The hard, vicious pounding of machine guns was paced by the smoky flash of tracers. The Boche formation split apart in dismay under this onslaught, and Matty stuck to the leader, pursuing the Pfalz like its own shadow. A swoop, a twist, a quick lunge, and Matty's twin Vickers rapped out a harsh cacaphony. A desperate lurch took the Boche out of the first burst, but his second caught the Pfalz broadside. There was instantaneous change in the actions of that Ger-

man plane. Its prop still turned, its wings were unscarred, its controls unharmed. But now there was a dead hand on the stick, and Matty's experienced eye sensed the difference immediately. It was unnecessary to hammer more steel into a corpse. Even as the Pfalz rolled onto its back and started slipping into its last spin, Matty wheeled away.

His eyes were narrowed to unnatural slits, his normally pleasant mouth distorted into a silent snarl. Up to a certain point Matty was the artisan, the skillful exponent of masterful tactics. But once the battle was joined, he changed. Once his fingers clamped down on the triggers, he threw away strategy, finesse, caution. At that point he became a killer. The movement of hands and feet, the choice of position; all were forgotten or left to instinct. His conscious mind concentrated itself upon destroying his enemy, with a single, terrible purposefulness that would not be deflected or denied. And his companions needed no more than his example.

Before such ferocity the Boches could not make a stand. In a length of time measured in seconds rather than minutes, the compact patrol of six was reduced to two, fleeing deeper into Germany on diverging courses, and one other which stumbled downward in a drunken glide, hoping for the merciful escape of a forced landing. The other three would never fly again.

Swooping out level, Matty eased for a moment to allow the other Spads to take up their positions on his flanks. He shook his head from side to side, as if to clear it. His taut features relaxed, his eyes became normal. He felt neither triumph nor sorrow nor rage, merely the inner satisfaction of a man who has done a good job, and knows it. For the time being, killing was his job, and he was an expert. Those on the ground, who saw him only in his natural state, were

unanimous in attributing his success to skillful strategy. Matty never said anything, but he sometimes wondered how right they were.

The six-sided drome of the 11th crawled toward him out of the landscape, and he eased his throttle forward. One by one the other three Spads of A Flight circled, settled, and rolled toward the hangars. Matty, coming in last, angled cross-wind just enough so that he ended in front of A Hangar without taxiing.

In Operations office Major Polson asked no questions, but looked over his shoulder while he wrote in the squadron log. A few brief phrases were enough: *Encountered six Pfalz, Type D, near Cruvette. Three destroyed; one doubtful, forced landing. Time, 15 Hrs., 20. Altitude, 2000.* No more. No individual confirmation requested. No hint of which Spad pilot shot down which Pfalz. That detail, the C. O. knew, would be settled later in the barracks, probably through the agency of a pair of dice, or a pack of greasy cards. Individual records, in the 11th, were a minor matter. Men who deal in death daily seldom begin to worry about which one is the biggest hero until long afterward.

"Sherman is here," said the major, "and I've sent for Steve Winter. Stick around for a few minutes, will you, Matty?"

Matty nodded and lighted a cigarette. He chatted with Brook Sherman about carburetor adjustments until Steve arrived; then the three flight leaders followed the C. O. into the rear office.

"**A**T ease, buzzards. If there were chairs, I'd tell you to sit down. . . I've got good news for you, and bad news, too. It seems that you and your pilots have been doing pretty well lately. In fact, the 11th, in the month ended yesterday, destroyed more enemy planes, and suffered fewer casualties, than any

other pursuit squadron in this sector. Headquarters has taken notice; there are going to be some D. S. C.'s, and a squadron *fourragiere* from the French."

"Stow it, major," muttered Steve Winter, B Flight leader. "Let's have the bad news, and get it over with."

The C. O. cleared his throat. "Your performances have attracted notice elsewhere, it seems. Even back in the States. I suppose you've all heard of Arnold Destry?"

"The munitions manufacturer, you mean?" frowned Steve.

"Yes. Probably the biggest, and the wealthiest, in the country, with tremendous political influence—even in the army. Well, he has a son named Wallace, who finished flying training in Texas some months ago, and has been instructing ground classes since, at Tours."

"He would," growled Brook Sherman.

"Exactly. That is just what others are saying. In spite of his father's powerful position, there are certain newspapers which do not hesitate to flay him as a profiteer. They point out scornfully that while the poor man's son is drafted and sent to die in the trenches, the rich powder king's son practices his aviation on the ground in a city two hundred miles behind the lines. Such statements, you understand, cannot be allowed to go unrefuted; they are extremely bad for the morale of the people at home. Consequently, the elder Destry has arranged for his son to be sent to the Front." The major dropped his eyes. "In fact, he is arriving this evening."

Steve Winter's tone betrayed the disgust that all three of them felt. "You mean, he's coming *here*?"

The C. O. nodded, keeping his eyes on his desk, as if he had little relish for the instructions he must give them. "He's going to fly with us, naturally. But you understand that under no circumstances must he be allowed to come to harm. His

death over the lines would be widely publicized, and would do much harm to the Allied cause—to say nothing of his father's personal reaction. Conversely, if he is successful—gains victories, makes a reputation—the effect on the press and the public would be very favorable.”

Steve Winter snarled, “You mean if he’s bumped off, *we* go to Blois for it, and if he turns out a hero, *he* gets the credit?”

“That’s about the size of it.” The major smiled wryly. “Well, who wants a replacement?”

You could have cut the silence with a dull knife.

“I don’t blame you much,” said the C. O. “But somebody has to be the goat. How about it, Matty? A Flight is short a man, isn’t it?”

Matty opened his mouth as if to protest. But then he shrugged, and his lip curled as he said quietly, “I’ll take him.”

“Good. Captain Laird is driving the lad up; they’ll probably be here about seven. Captain Laird is an ordinance inspector in Paris, acting as representative of the Destry interests, and will arrange all of the son’s affairs. Incidentally he authorizes me to tell you that confirmed victories for Destry will be worth \$500 apiece.”

The three flight leaders stared at him in astonishment. It was Brook Sherman who demanded, “You mean that if we say he shot down a Boche, when he didn’t, we collect \$500? How about the confirmation?”

Major Polson flushed uncomfortably as he explained. “If one of you shoots down a German plane, which is confirmed, you can enter the victory under his name instead of your own, that’s all.”

“Nuts!” said Steve Winter angrily. “Not me.”

Brook Sherman, however, looked thoughtful. “\$500, eh? That’s a lot of francs, Steve. Better think it over.”

Matty made no comment; in truth, he

was not especially interested. Just some more of the rottenness that came under the head of war, he mused. Of course he realized the propaganda value of a Destry’s activities, and was prepared to carry out the C. O.’s instructions to the best of his ability. That, he figured, would let him out. He did not foresee the far-reaching implications in the situation.

HE was on hand at headquarters, early in the evening, when the car arrived from Paris. At first he mistook the identity of the two occupants; the short voluble man with beady eyes and the flood of questions, instead of being young Destry, turned out to be Captain Laird. The new pilot, who had little to say, was hardly to be distinguished from a thousand other pilots Matty had met. Medium height, straight sandy hair, quick blue eyes and sinewy build, there was little to mark him as a rich man’s son except possibly the fact that his whipcord uniform fitted like a glove, and that he was accompanied by an extraordinary amount of luggage. There was a short argument at the car, before it started on the return trip; Matty discovered that Destry was insisting that the captain take half the bags back with him.

“Are you sure you’ll be comfortable?” protested the captain.

“If I need anything, I’ll send for it,” was the reply.

“Yes, that’s right, sir. I’ll drive up every day or two, of course. Let me know if there’s any complaint,” added the captain, glancing sharply at Matty as he climbed into the car.

Brook Sherman leaned toward Matty and growled behind his hand, “Don’t forget to ice the champagne, before the patrol leaves.”

Matty hissed, “Shut up!” and waited until the car had driven off. Then he said flatly, “Come along, Destry. I’ll show you your bunk.”

The following morning, before the eight o'clock patrol left, Matty himself superintended the servicing of a brand new Spad.

"You'll take joy-rides, for a day or so," he told the new pilot, "until you get used to the bus. She's nose-heavy, you know."

Destry only said, "For a day or so? Okay," but Matty thought he caught the glimmer of a sarcastic smile.

"I don't know what kind of discipline you've been used to," he said sharply, "but on the Front a man obeys orders, because his life may depend on it. I'm your flight leader; your life has been placed in my hands. I don't want any mistakes, understand?"

Destry looked at him in a way that Matty did not quite read correctly. "I guess we won't have any trouble about that."

"Right. Don't go out of sight of the field."

When the eight o'clock came back, Matty saw that the new Spad was still standing in the same spot. He accosted a mechanic.

"Did Lieutenant Destry go up?"

"Yes, sir. He was up for about an hour."

"Did he go out of sight of the field?"

"No, he was right overhead all the time."

Matty nodded, and walked slowly down toward the barracks. He met Destry and said,

"Take a couple more hops, this afternoon. And try out your guns on the floating targets, in the lake over to the west."

The next evening, when Captain Laird popped in from Paris, he brought with him a late edition of the *Paris Herald*. Matty saw the prominent headline, DESTRY JR. FLYING ON FRONT, and later read the article, which was quite long. One paragraph was a credit to the full-fledged imagination of Captain Laird, if nothing else.

The young flyer arrived on the Front Tuesday afternoon, where he was given a vociferous welcome by the pilots of the 11th Aero Squadron. He was immediately taken across the lines, where he was initiated into air combat against the enemy, and that evening a large celebration was given in his honor in the barracks.

Had he thought a little faster, Matty would have destroyed that newspaper immediately. But he inadvertently left it lying around, and soon everyone had seen it. The remarks of the other pilots were picturesquely unprintable, and Destry was thereafter studiously ignored.

The following morning he reported for his first patrol.

"Do you see this?" asked Matty. He clenched the fingers of his right hand, but left the thumb extended, and made a motion over his shoulder like a hitchhiker begging a ride. "That's a signal. When you see me do that, it means to leave the formation, fly back toward the drome until you're behind the balloon lines, and wait there. The patrol will pick you up on the way home. If we don't come along before your gas runs low, come in and land by yourself."

Destry said, "Yes, I see," in a tone so low that Matty wasn't sure he had heard.

"That's an order, understand?" he repeated sharply.

"Yes, I understand. . . Perfectly," added Destry.

FOR a week Matty managed to carry on with his attention divided between two objectives; strafing the Germans, and protecting his protegee, Wallace Destry. In the latter he was successful; first, because he was careful not to get into any trouble while the new pilot was along; and second, because he always ordered Destry back into safe territory when combat seemed imminent. In spite of which Destry, in that time, was credited with three confirmed victories.

Two were sold to him outright by Brook Sherman, who each time deposited Captain Laird's \$500 check to the credit of the squadron mess fund. The third Destry actually shot down with his own guns. An A Flight patrol had cornered a two-seater Hanover low down in the far eastern end of the sector. There being no other Boches in sight, Matty had refrained from giving the customary signal. After the first attack had crippled the Hanover, killing the observer, Matty waved the others aside and gestured to Destry to go ahead. Though the Boche pilot continued to fight desperately, Destry's second burst must have severed a control somewhere. The Hanover spun into the ground.

It was one victory the 11th did *not* celebrate by a binge.

But A Flight's record as a whole was beginning to suffer. At first Matty wondered if he was slipping; then he realized that it was his dual purpose that affected his tactics. No longer could he maneuver freely, cutting into and out of German skies whenever he felt like it. He always had to remember his precious charge, and get him safely out of the way first; by that time the opportunity had often evaporated. The squadron's confirmations for the week were half the usual number.

It was on Monday afternoon that Matty saw the shark-fin Fokkers from a distance. He mentioned it to Major Polson, later.

"Looks like the same crowd that was across from us, on the Vesle. We thought it was a new model ship, then; remember?"

The C. O. looked up sharply, instantly thoughtful. "The shark-fins, eh? No, it isn't a new model ship. It's a regular D-VII Fokker, with an extra vertical fin in the middle of the fuselage. One was shot down near Coulommiers. Our Intelligence learned they belonged to the

55th *Staffel*; von Brehn's outfit. They must have been shifted—"

He paused abruptly, and his jaw hardened. "By God! That damned newspaper article!"

Matty stared. "What do you mean?"

"Don't you see? It's come to the ears of the Germans, of course. Not espionage, necessarily; it would be copied in the Swiss papers, and other neutral countries. Destry would make a nice prize for them, naturally. They've sent the shark-fins here to get him."

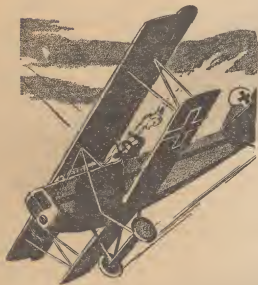
He pondered a moment, frowning. "What's the number of his ship? . . . It makes no difference. The Boches probably haven't learned *that*, but we must take no chances. We'll paint out the numbers; all of them. Then nobody can be identified in the air. At least they won't be able to cut him out of a formation and overpower him alone. I'll give the order to the riggers immediately."

"Maybe we'd better leave him on the ground for a while," suggested Matty hopefully.

"No, he's got to fly. But for God's sake, be careful to keep him away from von Brehn's killers!"

BEFORE another two days had passed Matty perceived that the major's anxiety was justified. It became obvious that the shark-fin Fokkers were there particularly to give their attention to the 11th. They didn't care very much whether they met other Allied planes or not, and weren't averse to knocking off a lone D-H or a Salmson when the opportunity offered. But every time they sighted one of the 11th patrols there was a battle. And usually a mean battle, too, for the pilots of the 55th *Staffel* were veterans, the pick of the German skies, and no doubt they were spurred on by a reward offered for a certain notorious victim.

Matty's trouble redoubled. Shep Vin-



son came down with the flu, and when he had motioned Destry to the rear, he found himself going into action with a half-sized patrol at his back. The victory roster of the 11th almost came to a halt; its casualty list grew.

Late Friday afternoon A and C Flights did a joint patrol. They ran into the shark-fin crowd northeast of the river; due to the unexpected arrival of some French Nieuports, the engagement didn't last long, but there were two Spads that did not make the return trip.

After they had landed, Destry was loitering near the first hangar, alone, as usual. Brook Sherman came out of Operations office, saw him, and walked

over. Brook's face was ominously expressionless, his movements deliberate. He lifted off helmet and goggles together, tossed them to the ground. Then he stripped off his leather flying coat, dropped it at his feet. His voice was flat as a board.

"You saw Slim Simmons go down, this afternoon?"

Destry reddened faintly. "I—I didn't see it. But I heard. I'm sorry." Everyone knew that Slim had been Brook's closest friend.

"You didn't see it? Why?"

"I was too far away."

"Oh. You were too far away." Brook's voice was still perfectly level. "And does it occur to you that if you hadn't been quite so far away, things might possibly have turned out differently for Slim?"

Destry's flush deepened. "I was ordered to leave."

Abruptly Brook's voice broke to a rasp. "You were ordered—nuts! What the hell difference does that make? If you were half a man, if you had the guts of a kitten, you'd forget to see an order like that. You'd stick with your patrol, where you belong, and—"

"Wait a minute!" Matty grabbed Brook by the arm; under the shirt sleeve he could feel the muscles taut as steel bands. "This man belongs to A Flight, Brook, not C. If you've got any bawling out to give, give it to me, and I'll pass it on. I'm responsible for his actions."

For a tense moment the two flight leaders faced each other. Brook had never had anything but the deepest respect and liking for Matty; yet for just an instant his clenched fist poised, quivering.

"Go down to barracks, Destry," said Matty sharply, without turning his head. "Pick up your things, Brook. Let's take a little walk. I want to talk to you."

Destry hesitated, then moved off. Inside the open door of the hangar a me-

chanic snickered. Brook Sherman shrugged, and scooped up his coat and helmet.

But on the path behind the hangars, it was not Matty who did the talking. He kept quite still, while Brook worked off the excess of his emotions in words. Finally the C Flight leader spat disgustedly.

"Aw, it's no use. Just a rotten mess. To hell with him."

"Now you've got the right idea," grinned Matty. "But listen, Brook. You shot down one of those Fokkers, didn't you? How about selling the confirmation to Destry?"

The glare returned to Brook's eye immediately. "Like hell! Do you think I'm crazy?"

Matty said quietly, "Think a minute, Brook. You know that every once in a while a man is taken off the Front and sent back to the States. Usually a man who has done his bit, made a reputation. Without saying anything, you and I have probably both been hoping to ourselves—well, forget that. But don't you see—Destry has got three now. A few more and he'll be in line for orders home, and more apt to get them than we are. In other words, the sooner he gets to be an ace, the sooner we get rid of him. See?"

Brook saw. His lip curled. "So he can go back home a hero, while we stay here in this bloody stew, go on and on, never knowing which day we get a bullet in the back? Nice thought, isn't it? Nice future. No thanks, Matty. Not me. No more. Somebody else can sell him victories, if they want to. I wouldn't help make a phony hero out of that stuffed shirt, not for a *million* dollars. I'm through.

Matty shrugged, and turned back toward the mess. "Okay, Brook. It's just the way you look at it. Come on, we both need a drink."

Matty wondered, the next morning, if

Brook's words would have any effect on the newcomer. Brook had put it very bluntly: "If you had the guts of a kitten, you'd forget to see an order like that." Curving west past Nocelle, Matty spied the enemy formation beyond the river, and turning his head, jerked his hand over his shoulder in the customary signal. For just a moment he thought his order was going to be disregarded, and he started to grin with joy. But then Destry's Spad whipped up into a bank, swung off in a right angle turn, and soared back across the lines obediently. Matty mumbled a sour curse.

That scrap ended with two shark-fin Fokkers down; two Spads, crippled, made forced landings on the right side of the lines.

SUNDAY was no holiday; the murder business never takes a day off to rest, unless forced by circumstances. But this day, as it happened, circumstances were beyond human control. Low clouds poured a drizzle of rain from dawn to dark, and not a plane took off. By Monday morning, however, the storm cleared, the clouds blown away by a strong wind out of the west.

The C. O., peering anxiously at the sock, which was whipped out straight, said to Marry, "Have to watch that wind today. You'll be blown down into the eastern end of the sector and have to fight your way back against it. Better allow ten minutes extra to get home."

Matty nodded and buckled the chin



strap of his helmet a little tighter than usual as he walked toward the five Spads idling on the deadline. Shep Vinson, still weak from his bout with the flu, was being helped to climb into his cockpit; he had insisted on coming, against Matty's advice. Destry was already down behind his cowl, and did not look up as Matty passed. A patrol of five, thought Matty; but after you eliminated those two, it really meant only three effectives.

That was the thought in his mind, half an hour later, when he saw the two Hanovers doing a little observation over the western curve of the salient. They were several thousand feet lower than he was, and kept swinging listlessly in wide circles and figure eights. They would slip across a short way into Allied air, take a look at whatever it was they were looking at, and then slide back again. Instinctively Matty headed up wind and angled until he was in a position to dive toward them. But he did not dive. Not yet.

For he saw, also, the close-knit formation of five Fokkers that seemed to do no more than float lazily against the high sky, up behind his right shoulder. His second or third sharp glance identified the

peculiar hump on the tops of their fuselages; they were the shark-fin crowd, all right. They weren't kidding him a bit. Their leader was watching him just as closely as he was watching them. At his first move to dive on the two-seaters—*r-r-rip!* Down would come those Fokkers on his back.

After a brief hesitation, he twisted round in his seat to look back toward Destry. Matty's hand came up, gave a couple of quick jerks. Destry must have been looking toward him; probably waiting. His Spad whipped up on a wing, and was gone in a flash of reflected sunlight.

Matty immediately felt easier. That was off his mind, anyway. One ship less with which to meet the conflict that was brewing; but even at that, he felt better. Now, at least, he could maneuver freely.

He spent two or three minutes trying to improve his position in regard to the Hanovers. He did improve it, but not much. Those two-seaters seemed to have no definite purpose, unless it was to decoy him in under the Fokkers, which never drifted far away. Five Fokkers, and two Hanovers; that made seven. And he had four,



one of them right out of a sick bed. Practically two to one odds. Too stiff.

Suddenly he was wagging his wings. Immediately he curved right in a short arc, and shoved his nose down. His comrades followed, warming their guns with The Hanover pilots were wide awake, however. Promptly the two big ships veered, nosed down for speed, and ran. Ran straight toward a point directly below the group of Fokkers.

But Matty was not watching the observation ships in front of him. He was looking up. Yes, the Fokkers were wheeling hurriedly; they had been watching closely, just as he suspected. The leader dipped, then plunged abruptly. Behind him the rest copied his dive, strung out in a long slant, aimed for that same hypothetical point. All the calculations were neat and correct; in a few seconds they would all arrive at the same spot simultaneously—Spads, Fokkers and Hanovers.

But at that moment Matty threw a wrench into the tactics; a wrench that upset the odds abruptly. With a quick swoop he leveled out and shot across the intervening sky. A Flight, perhaps surprised but not caught napping, followed on his heels. The Fokkers were still diving steeply when the Spads struck them on the horizontal, from the side, with machine guns hammering out a staccato challenge.

This move of Matty's left the two Hanovers out of things entirely, a couple of thousand feet below, thus cutting the odds from seven to four, down to five to four; quite a different matter. It gave his Spads the first advantage of surprise and altitude, as well, for the Boches dropped another hundred meters or so before they could pull out of that dive, and the Spads were above them. This advantage, slight as it was, cost the Germans first blood. For Matty himself, swooping like a hawk upon the tail of the nearest Fokker, delivered a snarling volley that found its target before the astonished Boche real-

ized that he was under fire. Matty's whanging slugs clawed away half the rudder post, and a sizeable chunk of black-crossed fabric floated off on the breeze. The Fokker went into a slow, even spin without ever coming completely out of its dive.

And now the odds were even; four to four.

MATTY swerved out of a burst that reached up for him from below, and banked hard to the right. The German formation had split apart, and already the affair was resolving itself into a series of duels. But in that case, where was his own opponent? Ah, that was it! Two Fokkers had caught one Spad in a dangerous cross-fire, and were whipping it unmercifully, first from one flank and then from the other. Since the pilots' numbers had been obliterated at the major's orders, Matty could not be sure, but he thought it might be Shep Vinson.

He whirled in that direction; at the same moment another Spad did the same thing. For those two Boches the complexion of things changed in the twinkling of an eye. Instead of having one foe to harry, they found themselves beset by three, all angry as hornets. Matty forced one blunt-nosed enemy aside by a threatening burst, and carried the Fokker right off to some distance by repeated blasts at its tail. Then he went to work on that Boche in earnest.

Matty had gotten beyond the stage of tactics now; he was fighting with the simple, savage fury of a jungle slayer. When he saw a red flare streak out from the cockpit of the Fokker in front of him, his rage boiled over into scorn.

"Nobody can help you now, you Prussian swine! . . . You're alone in that ship, and I'm alone in this one!"

His twin Vickers pounded out a hateful of hissing steel, and tiny ribbon of torn fabric fluttered from the Fokker's

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Dare-Devil Aces

left wing. The German shuddered into a right turn. But Matty had expected a right turn, and was half a second ahead. His next burst grazed the black-hued, triangular fin on the top of the fuselage. In desperation the Fokker bent into a dive. Matty plunged in pursuit. Down the sky they roared, one after the other.

The Boche dared not try another turn; he essed jerkily from side to side, striving to dodge the streams of searing steel with which Matty was flaying his path. But he could not dodge them forever. Finally he miscalculated, or Matty outguessed him. The Fokker veered left, when it would have done better to veer right. Matty's snarling tracers spitted the fuselage from end to end. The tail surfaces disintegrated, and the prop splintered into a ragged stump, all in an instant. A rudderless hulk, the Fokker plunged down.

Matty pulled his nose up, his features contorted.

"There," he thought to himself. "Now the odds are four to three in our favor. Now we'll see—"

But wait. What did he see? He blinked, and looked again. Instead of six ships just above him, whirling in conflict, there seemed to be nearer sixteen, and most of them were Fokkers. Ah, that cursed flare; that crimson cry for help! There must have been a second formation up in the clouds, or in the eye of the sun. They were too late to help the shooter of that flare, but they were not too late to exact a terrible revenge from the Spads.

He had no sooner realized the state of affairs before three blunt-nosed demons plunged toward him. He zoomed to meet them with a defiant blast, and then whirled into a spiral as his sheaf of fire poured back at him threefold.

HOW long that stage of the battle lasted was always vague in Matty's mind, afterward. It seemed like hours, and

again it seemed like only a few moments. Perhaps his mind, faced with stark destruction time after time, stood still in sheer horror. Always there were at least two foes attacking him; sometimes as many as four. Constantly he was forced on the defensive, spiralling dizzily amid criss-crossing streaks of tracer smoke, any one of which was capable of snuffing him out like a candle.

Once, when he found only two on his flanks, he careened out abruptly, and shot one down with a lightning burst that was like the thrust of a rapier. Three more appeared from nowhere, and he was again promptly surrounded, hounded into his defensive turning.

Once he caught sight of a Spad nearby, but as it shot past with a Boche in hot pursuit he spied the triple arrows, the insignia of the 68th. "Must be drifting," he thought numbly. "That damned wind. . . . The 68th patrols the eastern end. Hope there's lots of them. We need a lot of company."

But there evidently were not enough to turn the tide. The battle roared on; now Matty was constantly beset by not less than three Fokkers. One was snapping at his tail, and one on either flank, driving him relentlessly from maneuver to maneuver. Bit by bit his wings were being ripped to ribbons. One strut was splintered, his cowl was full of gleaming dents, his instrument board sagged from its fastenings. His motor still ran, but groggily, and he was groggy himself. The sweat ran down inside his goggles, his muscles ached his lips were parched and sour from powder smoke.

Once more, he thought desperately. Once more he could lash back at these devils who hounded him toward the gates of hell. Once more, and then he would be through. But he might take one of them with him, to burn forever in everlasting fire.

With a flick of the wrist he threw his

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Dare-Devil Aces

Spad through an Immelmann. It put him on top of one adversary, but gave his tail to the other two. He refused to look back. Let death strike. He'd strike first, forward. His fingers closed on the trigger grips. The Fokker in front of him veered, but Matty veered faster. His blast of tracer swept after it, caught up as the German changed to a zoom. The Fokker zoomed, but before it reached the top, hell caught up with it. The flame was merely a lick of crimson in the cockpit at first; then it was a gigantic puff of smoke. Then there was nothing left to be seen.

Matty, expecting every instant to feel the impact of steel in his back, hurled his ship aside as the harsh crackle of machine guns broke out behind him. But no tracers were reaching for his cockpit. He saw tracers there, but they were stabbing at a black-crossed cockpit, instead of his own. He had just a moment's glimpse of the plane those tracers came from. A Spad; one of his comrades of the 11th. Since it carried no pilot's number, he did not know which one, but in that dramatic instant his mind photographed a detail. A triangular rent in the trailing edge of the rudder, torn there by a bullet.

In the next instant the other man's tracers found their target in a gas tank. The tank burst in one tremendous explosion, and the concussive force struck Matty in the face like a blow from a gigantic fist. He was driven bodily sideways in the cockpit, and his Spad at the same time was tossed end over end like a chip in the surf.

When he finally regained control, a thousand feet lower, his ears were ringing, his senses numbed. He oriented himself with difficulty, only to find it hardly necessary. That stunning blast had signalled the end of the struggle; there was not a Fokker to be seen. Off to his left circled two Spads with the triple arrows; up above there was another, the one from the 11th that had crashed the Fokker off

his tail at the most critical moment of his life.

Matty, gazing up, moved his hand weakly. But the lone Spad wheeled away, and flew off toward the southeast.

"Hey, that's not our crowd," mumbled Matty. "That's the 68th. . . . Guess he must be slug nutty—like me."

But he dared not use up time now to gather the remnants of his patrol. His exhausts were coughing smoke, his ship was staggering drunkenly, and his head was throbbing like a trip-hammer. If he didn't get down soon, he would never get down alive. He set a course across the stubborn wind, toward the drome, and fought his reeling way homeward. But it wasn't until he was almost over the field, and reached to throttle to a glide, that he noticed the blood dribbling down his wrist, and realized that his left arm was half paralyzed.

AN HOUR or so later he lay stretched on a cot in the little room back of Operations office, where they had carried him unconscious from his cockpit. The surgeon had dressed the gash in his upper arm, and given him a jolt of cognac that brought him around. Now he merely relaxed, listening to the C. O.

"Reports phoned back from the balloons," said the skipper, "are that at least ten Fokkers, maybe more, will be confirmed. You broke the back of the shark-fin crowd, this morning, all right."

Matty didn't even grin. At that moment there was a step in the outer room; a voice said, "Captain Fale, C. O. of the 68th. Is he—"

"Oh, yes, captain," said Major Polson, turning. "Glad to see you. Quite a show this morning, wasn't it?"

"Show is right," was the heart-felt response. "Look here, major. You've got a pilot named Kirk, haven't you?"

"Why, yes. He's here now. Do you want to—"

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Dare-Devil Aces

"I want to shake his hand, by God! Let me tell you, major, there is some fighter! I wish we had more like him in the 68th. Though why he's been joining our patrols lately, I can't imagine."

"Joining your patrols?" exclaimed the major.

"Yes. He dropped down on our field one day last week, with a bad spark plug. Told us his name, and got acquainted a bit. Since then, the boys tell me he's been joining our formations, down in the eastern end, almost every day. And he's a terror with guns, that fellow. Shot down three Boches last week, while with our patrols, and today I understand he got three more. He didn't come back to our field; I'm glad to hear he reached here all right."

The major stared as if at a ghost. "Kirk? Why, you must be crazy, captain. Matty Kirk hasn't been joining your patrols."

"But why in hell would my lads try to kid me—"

"Wait; we'll ask Matty himself. Come in here."

Matty half rose on his elbow as the two C. O.'s entered.

Major Polson began, "Matty, what is he talking about—"

He was interrupted by a cry from Captain Fale. "Kirk! Why, that isn't Kirk! I've never seen this man before in my life."

Matty wondered which of them was delirious. "Well, my name is certainly Kirk," he declared. "And I never heard of anyone else by that name in the Air Service."

The three of them stared at each other, obviously bewildered, and at that moment the sputter of a motor came in the open door. A plane was gliding down toward the field.

"Someone coming in!" cried Major Polson, and turned quickly.

They heard the thump of an undercar-

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Death Has a Price

riage on the turf, and the rumble of shock absorbers. A Spad rolled across the tarmac, and just for a moment it was framed in the open door. In that moment Matty caught sight of a triangular gash clawed out of its rudder.

"Get hold of that man!" he shouted suddenly. "Bring him in here, whoever he is."

The major, standing in the doorway looking out toward the tarmac, started violently. "Why, it's Destry!" he exclaimed.

"Destry!" echoed Matty, equally astonished.

In another moment Destry himself appeared in the door. He was quite pale, there was a crust of dried blood on his cheek, and he swayed on his feet. His voice, however, was firm.

"Sorry, sir. I had a forced landing. Magneto trouble. They fixed it up on the advanced drome, and I came on in. Okay now."

"Here, look out!" cried the major, seizing the pilot's arm to steady him. "You're hurt. Come in here and sit down, before—"

At this point Captain Fale emitted a bellow of joy. "Kirk! I thought they said you were here. I came over to congratu-

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Dare-Devil Aces

late you, and to tell your C.O. . . . Say, what is all this, anyway?"

Major Polson was plainly more puzzled than ever, and a little angry. "That's what I'd like to know. How is it that he thinks you're Kirk, Destry? What have you been doing, anyway?"

Destry only flushed brick-red, and showed no sign of offering any explanations. But now Matty pried himself up to a sitting position, wound or no wound, and his expression held something like awe.

"I can do a little guessing," he said. "When I ordered him back, he went east and hooked up with the 68th, every time. Told them his name was Kirk, because they would recognize his own, of course. So I've been getting his confirmations. Is that it?"

Destry straightened up, bracing himself with one hand against the wall. "Damn it, I got tired of being told what to and what not to do. I was twenty-one last Wednesday, and decided to run my own life. My father can take care of his publicity, and his propaganda and his profits, without my help. I'm going to tell Captain Laird to go to hell. And those confirmations he paid for, for me! Wash those out, will you, major? I'll take care of my own confirmations, after this."

Matty chuckled. "It seems you've taken care of a few of them, already. I guess we didn't have you figured quite right, Wally. Listen; you know that little signal of ours? Like this?" He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "After this, that has a new meaning. It means, 'Stick a little closer to my tail, will you?'"

THE END

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